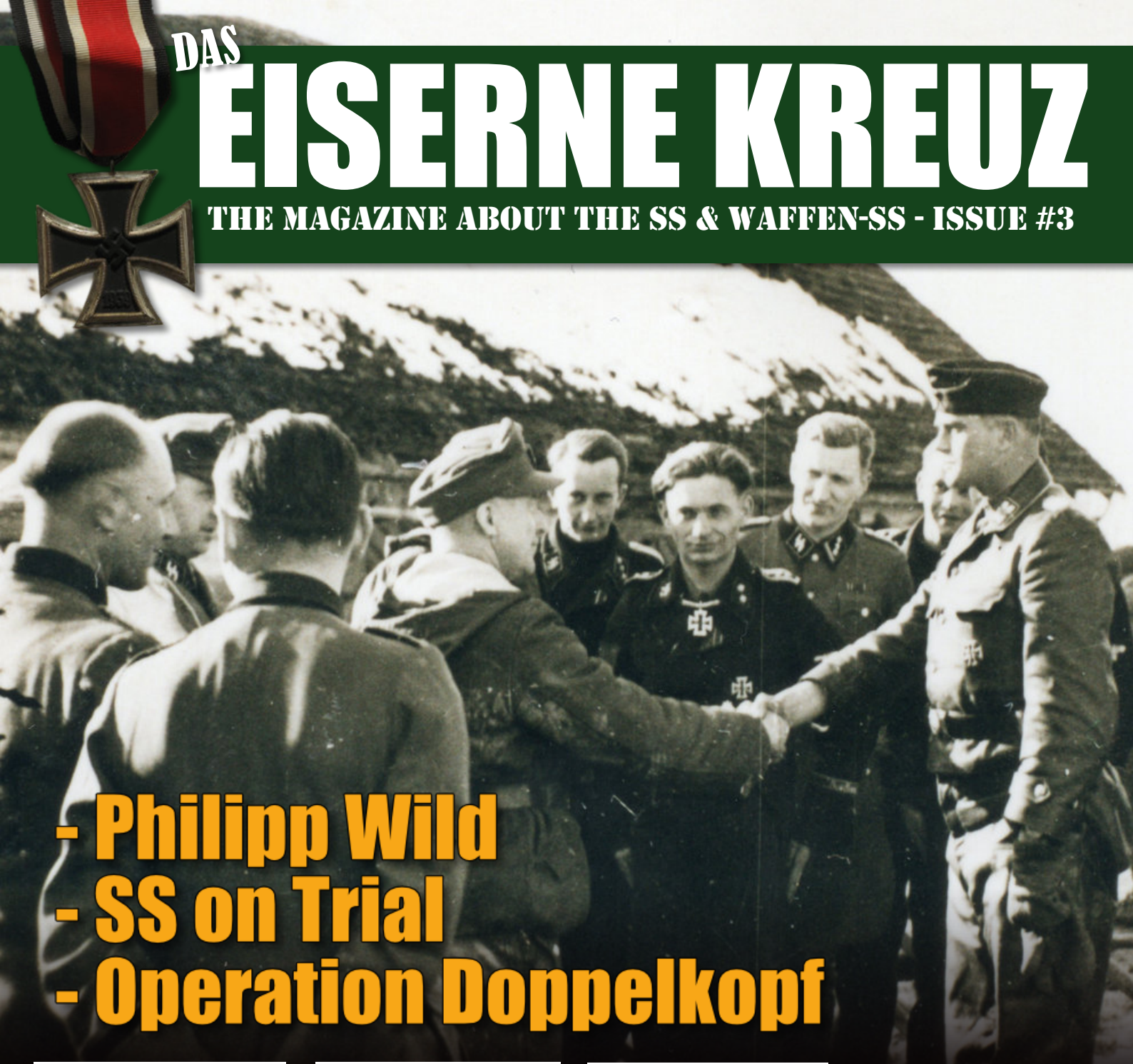
DAS EISERNE KREUZ

THE MAGAZINE ABOUT THE SS & WAFFEN-SS - ISSUE #3



- Philipp Wild
- SS on Trial
- Operation Doppelkopf

Fritz Darges

Per Dahl Nielsen

SS-Pz.A.A.2

Finns in the Wiking Division

Editorial

It is that time again! Issue No. 3 is now out for your review. Once again, we have strived to provide a diverse selection of articles that we hope will satisfy all our readers. Issue No. 2 was very well received, and we are deeply grateful for all the emails and messages we have received through various channels.

Finding subjects that appeal to everyone is always a balancing act. The highlights of this issue include an in-depth account of Philipp Wild, Knight's Cross recipient of SS-Pz.Abt. "Hermann von Salza," and a compelling story about Fritz Darges—a man who was truly at the center of history for a considerable time. Furthermore, this issue contains a well-researched article on Operation Doppelkopf—Strachwitz's daring tank operation at the Gulf of Riga in the summer of 1944. We are also pleased to include a very interesting article on the Finnish volunteers in the SS Division Wiking, as well as a piece on the Danish SS volunteer Per Dahl Nielsen. Additionally, we are concluding two series in this issue: the story of Fritz Freitag and our "SS on Trial" segment.

As this issue expanded well beyond 70 pages, we were forced to move five articles, which have already been slated for Issue No. 4. However, having too much material is what we consider a "pleasant problem."

A new feature for Issue No. 3 is that it can now be downloaded directly from our website. For those of you who have signed up to receive the magazine via email, you will still receive it through that service. We are introducing this as we continue to test and find the best long-term solution for our readers. Our website address is www.eisernekreuz.com, where you will also find a link to our Facebook page—a place where we share news about future issues and other interesting updates.

We still encourage you to sign up for our mailing list, as this serves as a vital metric for us to gauge the continued interest in the magazine. We look forward to hearing from you. Please continue to send us your constructive feedback regarding the magazine and its content; it is essential for our ongoing improvement and our goal to keep you as a dedicated reader.

Georg Schwab
Responsile publisher and editor
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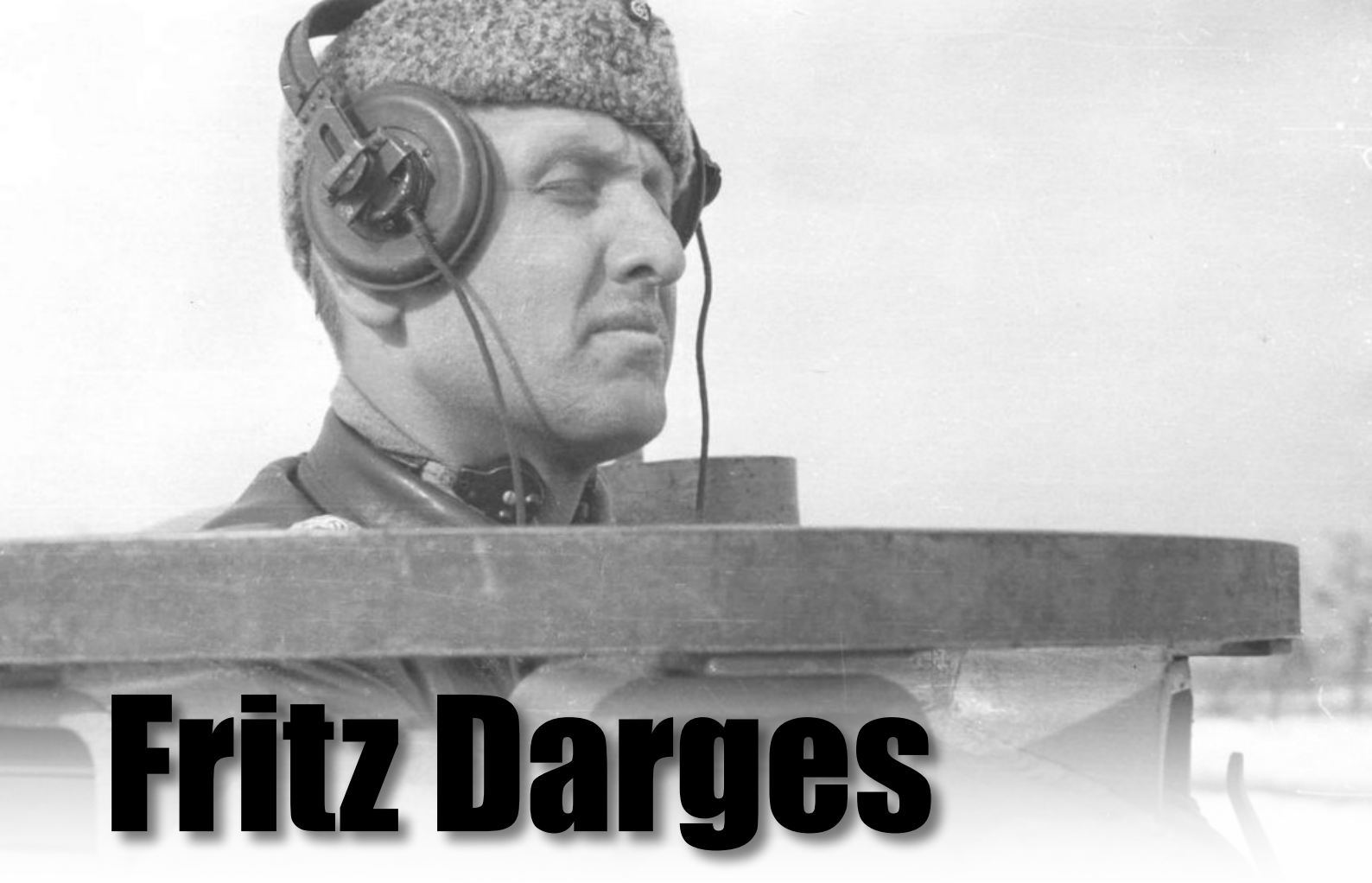


Fritz Darges

Fritz Darges ended the war as an SS-Obersturmbannführer and commander of the armored regiment of the 5.SS-Panzerdivision "Wiking," with which he was decorated with the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross. What is less known are his functions before the war, then from 1940 to 1942, and finally from 1943 to July 1944, which brought him into the intimate circle of the most powerful figures of the Third Reich. Deceased in 2009 at the age of 96, he was the last living witness of their daily lives.

First Steps in the SS

Fritz Darges was born on February 8, 1913, in Dülseberg (today Diesdorf), in the Altmark. In 1930, he obtained his diploma in Hermannsburg and subsequently trained in import-export in Hamburg. However, in April 1933, he volunteered for the SS, abandoning the commercial career he had initially chosen. A year later, he entered the SS-Junkerschule in Bad Tölz. This was a school intended to train the elite of the SS, which at the time depended on the Munich officers' school directed by General von Kochenhausen. SS-Junkers received the same military and tactical training as their counterparts in the Reichswehr.Officers from the Kriegsakademie came to administer the final exam to the SS officer candidates. But at Bad Tölz, instruction was largely provided by SS officers who had fought during the Great War, such as Herbert-Otto Gille or Felix Steiner. In addition to basic military instruction and tactics courses, SS-Junkers were entitled to history and politics courses where Nazi theories were instilled. Sport also occupied an important place in the curriculum. Fritz Darges completed his training in December 1934 with the rank of SS-Standartenoberjunker. During this pre-war era, only half of the graduates were assigned to the armed SS. The others joined either the SS-Totenkopfverbände, the SD, or returned to the Allgemeine-SS. Fritz Darges was among those who chose the armed SS, and on January 25, 1935, he was sent to serve within the I.S-turmbann of the SS-Standarte "Deutschland". He did not stay there long, as he was transferred on February 28 to the 2nd company of the SS-Standarte "Germania". He was promoted to SS-Untersturmführer on April 20, 1935, and was entrusted with the command of a section on May 17, 1935, in Arolsen. The unit was called upon to provide security missions for the Nazi Party, and it was during one of these occasions that Fritz Darges was noticed by the high dignitaries of the regime. In July 1936, he was called to the staff of Rudolf Hess, Adolf Hitler's deputy within the Nazi Party.

Above: An exceptional photograph bringing together three prestigious graduates from the December 1934 class of Bad Tölz. Recognized from left to right: Fritz Darges, Fritz Klingenberg, and Anton Laackmann. (Fritz Klingenberg Collection)

Adjutant to Martin Bormann

Fritz Darges met Reichsleiter Martin Bormann, personal secretary to Rudolf Hess, who had him appointed to his service as an Adjutant (aide-de-camp). Martin Bormann was the "grey eminence" of the Third Reich, a brutal and unscrupulous man whose power grew day by day. During the 1936 Reichsparteitag, Fritz Darges was lodged on the same floor as Adolf Hitler at the Hotel "Elefant" in Weimar. His mission was to be at Hitler's disposal for all organizational questions. It is surprising to see such a young SS officer placed in the service of the Führer in this way; it speaks to the excellent impression Darges must have made on his superiors. In a November 1998 interview on German television, Darges described Hitler: "He had clear eyes, and one had the impression he was examining you; as for his gaze, I do not remember it being grave and obstinate. Even his way of speaking was different from what we see today on television—not as hysterical,

Still within the Führer's inner circle, Fritz Darges is seen here in the company of Fritz Klingenberg, one of his best friends. (Fritz Klingenberg Collection)

Darges and Klingenberg pose together in front of the entrance to the SS-Führungshauptamt. (Fritz Klingenberg Collection)

clear and loud". As a convinced Nazi, Darges used equivocal vocabulary in this interview, with words cleverly chosen to leave listeners a free interpretation.

During the Bayreuth Festival in 1936, where Fritz Darges went as a reward for his services during the Nuremberg Reichsparteitag, Bormann took him to his side and made him his Adjutant at the end of the year. The function of the Adjutant consisted of settling all material and organizational problems of daily life. As Bormann was part of Hitler's entourage, Fritz Darges frequently rubbed shoulders with the master of the Third Reich, including at the Obersalzberg. There, Martin Bormann had not only a personal house but also a private office, the "Haus Hoher Göll," located a hundred meters from the Berghof. Fritz Darges was lodged in a room there.

At the Berghof, Fritz Darges was in contact with leading personalities. As Adjutant, he had to rigorously establish the daily program and act as a link between internal and external missions. One day, he was requested by Reichsminister Todt to trace the path leading to Kehlstein, an imposing building on the Obersalzberg. Costing thirty million Reichsmark—a considerable sum at the time—the construction of this house was Martin Bormann's idea.

In 1937, Fritz Darges was charged with preparing a state visit to Victor Emmanuel III. Eva Braun, her sister, and a few ladies-in-waiting were to be part

Fritz Klingenberg rubs shoulders with Adolf Hitler on a daily basis as an aide-de-camp. He is seen here on the right, holding the rank of SS-Sturmbannführer. On the left, Hans Pfeiffer and Ernst Kaltenbrunner can be recognized. (Fritz Klingenberg Collection)

of the trip discretely. Martin Bormann proposed: "Mein Führer, you know Fritz Darges well; he is the man for this mission!". In his interview, Darges stated: "Hitler asked me if I felt capable of doing that. It was a delicate matter when I think back on it today: me, a young brat, speeding into Italy with two Mercedes convertibles. We visited everything culturally possible, including the site of Pompeii. The island of Capri was the southernmost point of our journey". When asked if he knew Eva Braun was Hitler's mistress, Darges replied: "That was only known at the Obersalzberg level... Officially, Eva Braun was Hitler's personal secretary, but at the Berghof, everyone knew the story. Indeed, their rooms were adjacent and a door connected them".

Also in 1937, Fritz Darges accompanied Bormann and Hitler to the Villa "Hügel" in Essen, property of the Krupp family. Important, totally confidential financial negotiations took place there, which Darges attended as Bormann's Adjutant. Darges said of Bormann: "He liked me, otherwise he wouldn't have made me his Adjutant. He was a strict and pitiless chief". Bormann wrote in an evaluation dated January 3, 1940: "SS-Obersturmführer Fritz Darges served from July 1, 1936, to October 31, 1939, within the staff of the Deputy of the Führer... He always fulfilled his obligations, including various special missions for the Führer, with remarkable skill and tact... I have learned to know and appreciate him as an irreproachable person in all respects". Darges earned his promotion to SS-Obersturmführer on September 12, 1937.

In September 1939, during the invasion of Poland, he was on Adolf Hitler's special train. The train was protected by anti-aircraft wagons and contained living and working quarters for Hitler, as well as Keitel, Jodl, Hess, Ribbentrop, Göring, and Bormann.

Return to the SS-Verfügungstruppe

On October 31, 1939, Fritz Darges left his post as Adjutant to the Reichsleiter to rejoin the armed SS. He was assigned to I./Deutschland, with which he participated in the Western campaign in May and June 1940, earning the Iron Cross 2nd Class. On July 1, he was promoted to SS-Hauptsturmführer, and on the 16th, he was given command of the 7.K-p./Der Führer. His battalion commander, Fritz von Scholz, wrote: "Straight and open character... Intel-

lectual flexibility... Military knowledge sufficient, but troop leadership must be perfected... Somewhat estranged from the troops due to long service in the high spheres".

In November 1940, he was called to replace Max Wünsche as Adolf Hitler's personal aide-de-camp.

Adjutant to the Führer

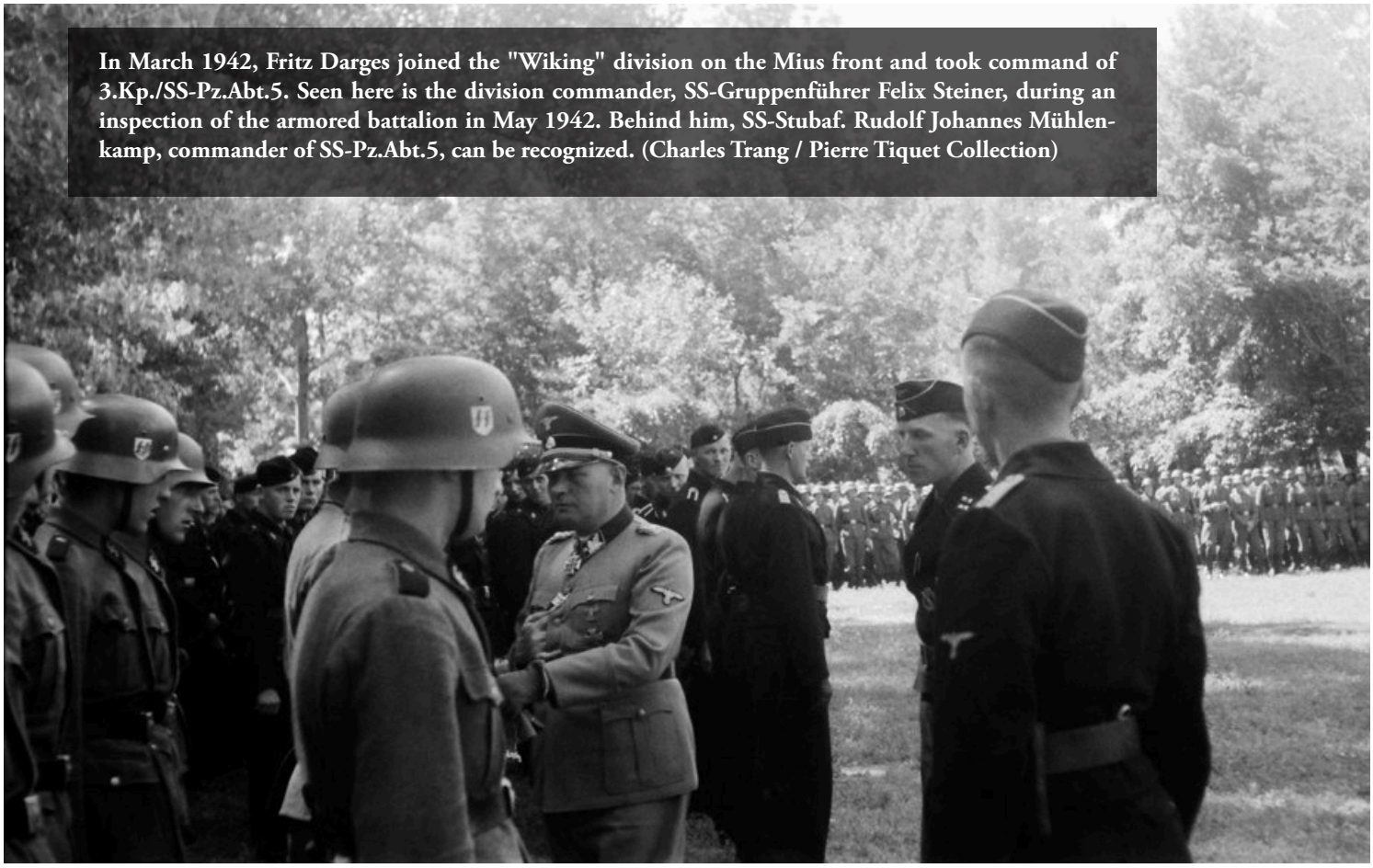
Darges was called for this function because he was already familiar with Hitler's entourage. In his television interview, Darges noted: "The Adjutantur included a personal Adjutantur and a military Adjutantur... We from the Waffen-SS were considered junior aides-de-camp. During situation conferences on the front, there were no civilians. As SS-Adjutanten, we didn't just provide a presence but had tasks to perform".

When asked about Hitler as a war leader, Darges replied: "He was perfectly capable of identifying and discussing situations on a map. But his decisions were not always right... like the management of the Vlasov army". For unknown reasons, Darges ceased being Hitler's personal Adjutant on March 16, 1942.

With the "Wiking" Division

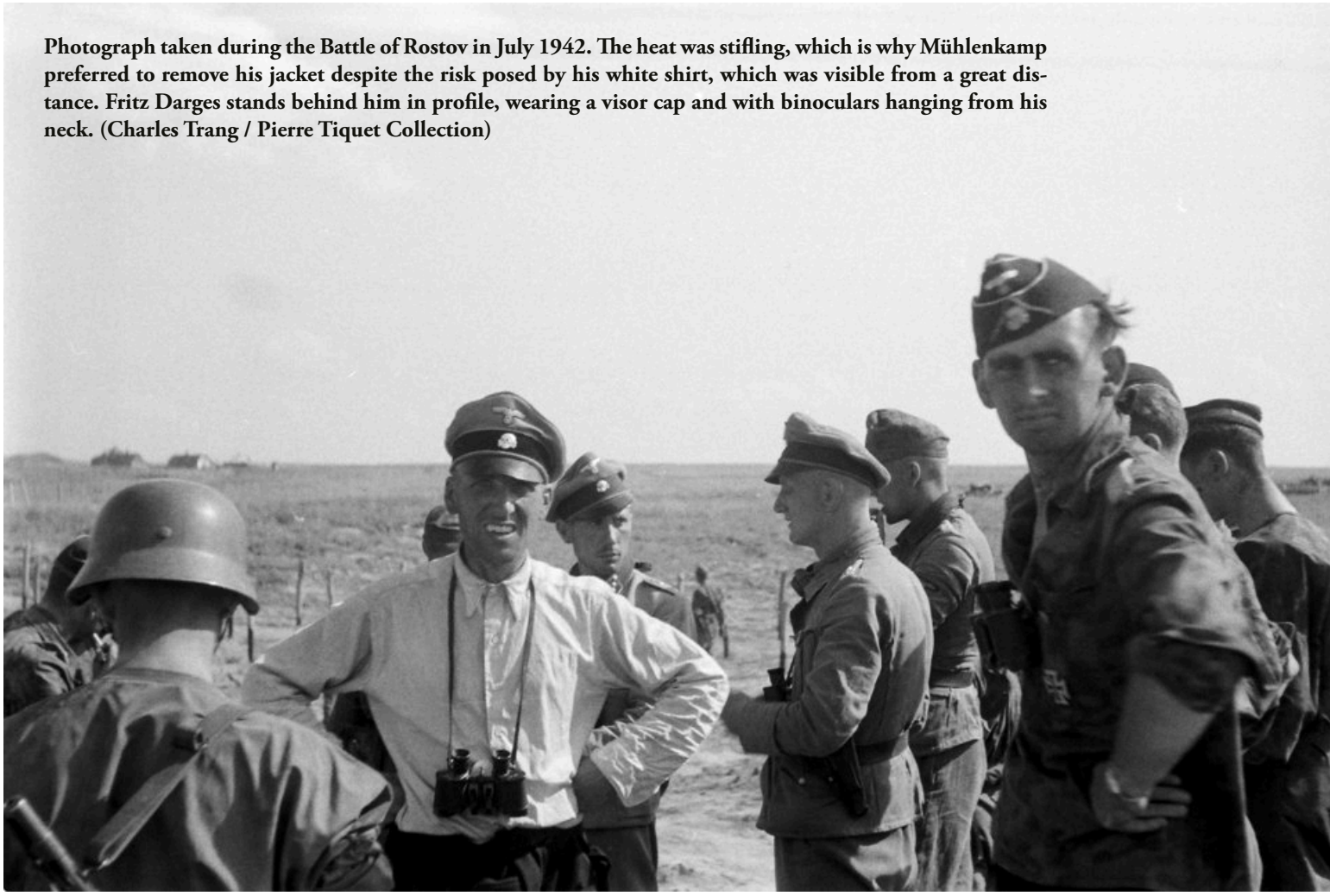
In March 1942, Fritz Darges was given command of the 3.Kompanie of the SS-Panzer-Abteilung "Wiking". His front-line experience was minimal and he was a stranger to the Panzerwaffe. His company was equipped with PzKpfw.IVs and PzKpfw.IIs. The unit performed well during the battle of Rostov in July 1942. During the 1942 summer campaign in the Caucasus, he showed proficiency in mobile warfare. He was wounded in January 1943 and, after his recovery, was recalled to the Führer's headquarters to serve again as a personal aide-de-camp.

A short-barreled PzKpfw.IV (7.5 cm L/24) from 3.Kp./SS-Pz.Abt.5 during the Battle of Rostov. (Charles Trang / Pierre Tiquet Collection)



In March 1942, Fritz Darges joined the "Wiking" division on the Mius front and took command of 3.Kp./SS-Pz.Abt.5. Seen here is the division commander, SS-Gruppenführer Felix Steiner, during an inspection of the armored battalion in May 1942. Behind him, SS-Stubaf. Rudolf Johannes Mühlenkamp, commander of SS-Pz.Abt.5, can be recognized. (Charles Trang / Pierre Tiquet Collection)

Photograph taken during the Battle of Rostov in July 1942. The heat was stifling, which is why Mühlenkamp preferred to remove his jacket despite the risk posed by his white shirt, which was visible from a great distance. Fritz Darges stands behind him in profile, wearing a visor cap and with binoculars hanging from his neck. (Charles Trang / Pierre Tiquet Collection)



Fritz Darges (left) prepares to decorate a deserving non-commissioned officer. In the background, SS-Ostuf. Kurt Schumacher attends this solemn ceremony. His Knight's Cross was awarded on May 4, 1944, as commander of 3.Kp./SS-Pz.Rgt.5. (Pierre Tiquet Collection)

August 10, 1944: Handover of command of SS-Pz.Rgt.5 between SS-Staf. Mühlenkamp and SS-Ostubaf. Fritz Darges, who can be seen on the far left. Standing beside him is Major i.G. Kleine. In the center, behind Mühlenkamp, Willi Hein is recognized with the Knight's Cross around his neck. He was then leading 2.Kp./SS-Pz.Rgt.5. (Pierre Tiquet Collection)

Return to Hitler

Back with Hitler as Adjutant, Darges was entrusted with special tasks, such as attending award ceremonies for Waffen-SS members. He was also tasked again with looking after Eva Braun, as he had during his time with Bormann.

At the Berghof, Darges was part of the small social circle that gathered in the evenings. On one occasion, after someone suggested Gretl Braun would be a good match for him, Darges insolently replied: "I don't care about becoming the Führer's brother-in-law".

Hitler was not one for sentiment, as evidenced by the incident that led to Darges being sent back to the Eastern Front. On July 18, 1944, at the Führer's HQ, Hitler was bothered by flies and asked Darges to remove them. Darges jokingly suggested the Luftwaffe adjutant should handle the "flying objects". Hitler entered a mad rage, immediately dismissed Darges, and replaced him with Otto Günsche. This dismissal likely saved Darges' life, as he was not present during the July 20 assassination attempt two days later.

With the SS-Pz.Rgt.5 on the Eastern Front

Darges, promoted to SS-Obersturmbannführer on January 30, 1944, rejoined the "Wiking" division in late July 1944. He succeeded Rudolf Mühlenkamp as commander of SS-Pz.Rgt.5 on August 10. He led the regiment through three major battles for Warsaw.

In late 1944, the division was sent to Hungary to break the encirclement of Budapest. Fritz Darges distinguished himself leading an armored group and was recommended for the Knight's Cross on January 17, 1945. The recommendation cited his "skilful command" and "outstanding combativeness," noting his group destroyed 46 tanks, 61 anti-tank guns, and 6 artillery pieces between January 1 and 7. The Knight's Cross was awarded to him on April 5, 1945.

Capitulation and Captivity

When the armistice was signed on May 7, 1945, Darges and his division surrendered to the Americans. He hid his Wehrpass in his shoes to keep it from being taken as a souvenir. He was interned at Dachau and later in a prisoner camp in Hamburg. He was released on May 1, 1948.

Autumn 1944: Fritz Darges walks alongside SS-Ostubaf. Hans Dorr, commander of SS-Pz.Gren.Rgt.9 "Germania." (Marc Rikmenspoel Collection)

Darges died in 2009 in Celle. He remained a convinced Nazi and never publicly criticized his Führer.

A little curiosity, in May 1944, Fritz Darges married the widow, Renate von Hadeln, of the fallen SS-Stubaf Hajo von Hadeln.

Sources

US NARA: Personal file of Fritz Darges
Charles Trang: Wiking May 1942 – April 1943
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Zeitzeugen berichten No. 4: Fritz Darges: im inneren Kreis

Charles Trang

Fritz Darges in Hungary, in the turret of his Befehlspanzer (command tank), a PzKpfw.V "Panther" Ausf.A. (Wiking Veterans' Association)

Below: Hungary, January 1945: In intense cold, the "Wiking" division attempts to relieve the Budapest garrison. Fritz Darges, in a leather jacket, speaks to an officer carrying maps. According to the caption, this is said to be Willi Hein, but it is difficult to be certain as the features differ significantly. Could it be Werner Westphal, then Divisions-O1? The adjacent photo will allow the reader to form their own opinion. (Tim Willemsen Collection)

OPERATION DOPPELKOPF

Count Strachwitz's Tank Raid in the Summer of 1944

In the summer of 1944, the Red Army shattered large sectors of the German Eastern Front. Powerful Soviet mechanized forces belonging to the 1st Baltic Front reached the Gulf of Riga in late July, severing the link between Army Group Centre and Army Group North. In a desperate countermove, the Germans launched Operation Doppelkopf with the aim of restoring communications and defeating the Soviet forces. One of the most decisive events of the operation was a bold and determined assault carried out by a small armored task force (Panzer-Kampfgruppe), led by Generalmajor Hyazinth von Strachwitz. With support from the German Navy, the group succeeded in achieving operational success.

On 22 June 1944, the Red Army launched Operation Bagration with four fronts (army groups). Over 1.2 million men, 2,715 tanks, 24,363 artillery pieces, and 5,327 aircraft were in motion. The Soviet offensive aimed to conquer Belarus, advance toward the Vistula River and East Prussia, and create the conditions for an assault on the Baltics. Soviet forces from the 1st and 3rd Belorussian Fronts broke through *3. Panzer-Armee* and *9. Armee* during the first phase of the operation, positioned in the north and south respectively of *Heeresgruppe Mitte's* defensive sector. They continued toward Minsk with the goal of encircling *4. Armee*. Through this pincer maneuver, the 1st and 3rd Belorussian Fronts succeeded in surrounding large parts of the German 4. Armee east of Minsk, causing Heeresgruppe Mitte's frontline to collapse.

The breakthroughs in *3. Panzer-Armee's* frontline also created a major gap between *Heeresgruppe Mitte* and *Heeresgruppe Nord*, through which Soviet units from the 1st Baltic Front began to attack. These units were tasked with protecting the 3rd Belorussian Front from attacks by *Heeresgruppe Nord* in the Baltics.

Attack on the Northern Front

As Operation Bagration entered its second phase with continued attacks westward, the long-awaited major offensive against *Heeresgruppe Nord* began. The 1st Baltic Front delivered the main blow of the attack, aiming to capture the vital railway junctions at Siauliai and Kaunas and reach the Gulf of Riga.

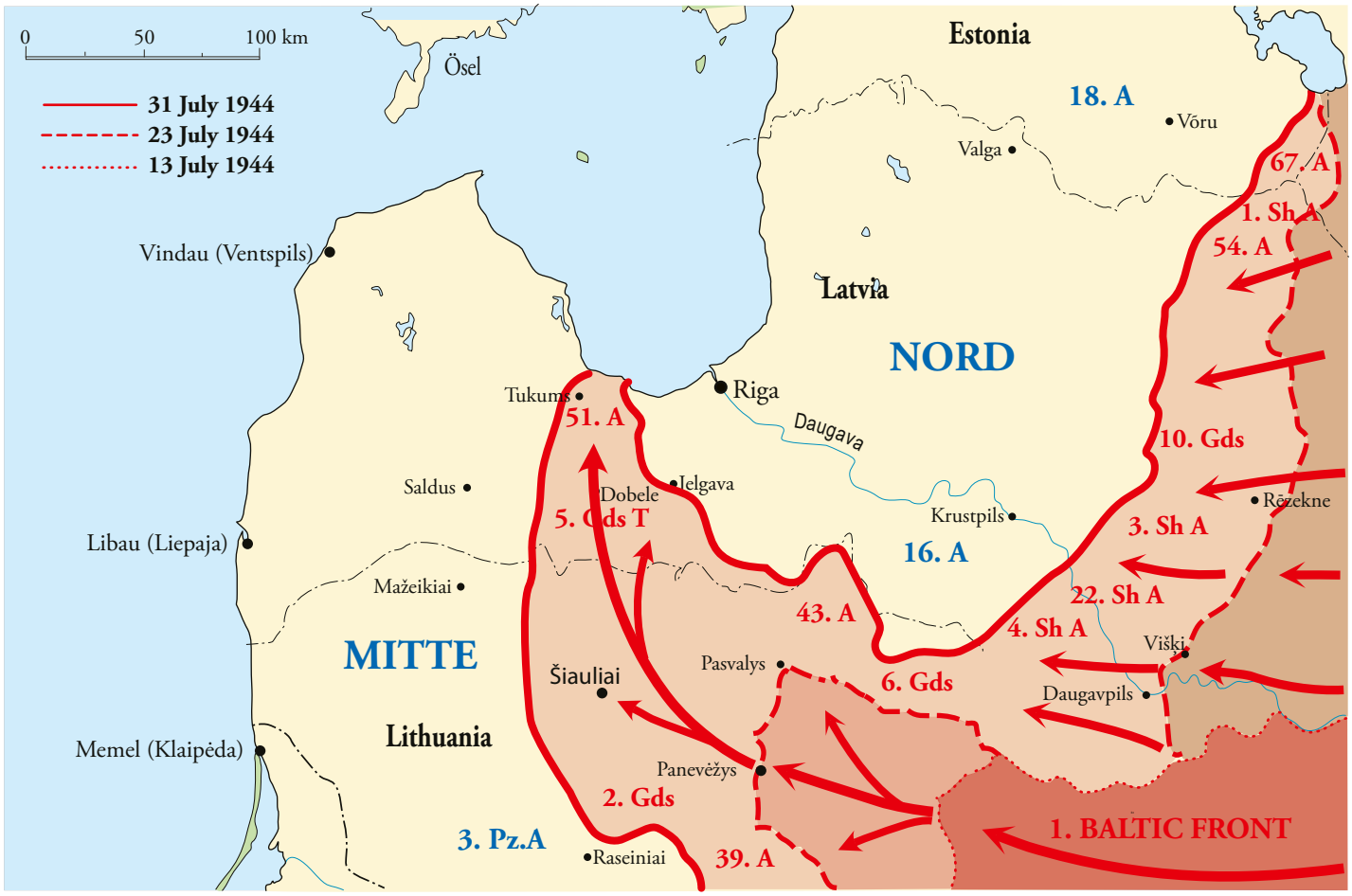
Simultaneously, the 2nd Baltic Front broke through German defenses and advanced toward Rezekne and Daugavpils, while the 3rd Baltic Front broke through at Pskov and Ostrov. To support the operation, the 3rd Belorussian Front directed its attacks toward the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, with the goal of threatening East Prussia.

The concentration of force by the 1st Baltic Front caused the gap between the two army groups to widen—the "Baltic Hole," as German generals came to call it. They tried to convince Hitler to abandon Estonia to free up units for a counterattack against the powerful Soviet formations in the gap between the two army groups. Hitler, however, refused to listen.

Meanwhile, the Baltic Hole grew ever larger, and by late July, the gap was 100 kilometers wide. The spearhead of the Soviet advance, consisting of the 3rd Guards Mechanized Corps, reached the Gulf of Riga on 31 July 1944. *Heeresgruppe Nord* was thus isolated.

Under the leadership of Lieutenant General Viktor Obukhov, the 3rd Guards Mechanized Corps had advanced nearly 300 kilometers in just 96 hours, making the corps' dash to the Gulf of Riga one of the most successful and daring armored operations of World War II. While *Heeresgruppe Nord* was cut off by the 1st Baltic Front's attack, it was also subjected to extremely violent assaults from the Leningrad Front and both the 2nd and 3rd Baltic Fronts, preventing the army group from sending reinforcements from north to south.

The army group did not possess a single Panzer-Division with which to launch a powerful counterattack.



Consequently, the task of reopening the connection fell to *Heeresgruppe Mitte*. However, *Heeresgruppe Mitte* was in an incredibly critical situation. The severely battered army group had just parried a Soviet tank attack on Warsaw, and on its left wing, defended by *3. Panzer-Armee*, Soviet units from the 3rd Belorussian Front had pushed the frontline back toward the border of East Prussia. Simultaneously, the Panzer-Armee's left wing in Courland was under threat.

Operation Doppelkopf

The Baltic Hole was so serious that the army group was forced to shift its focus there, a move deemed necessary by the Army High Command (Oberkommando des Heeres, OKH) and its newly appointed Chief of Staff, Heinz Guderian.

On 8 August 1944, Guderian presented a plan for a counterattack using two Panzer-Korps to push through the "Baltic Hole" in a northeasterly direction and re-establish contact with Heeresgruppe Nord. The

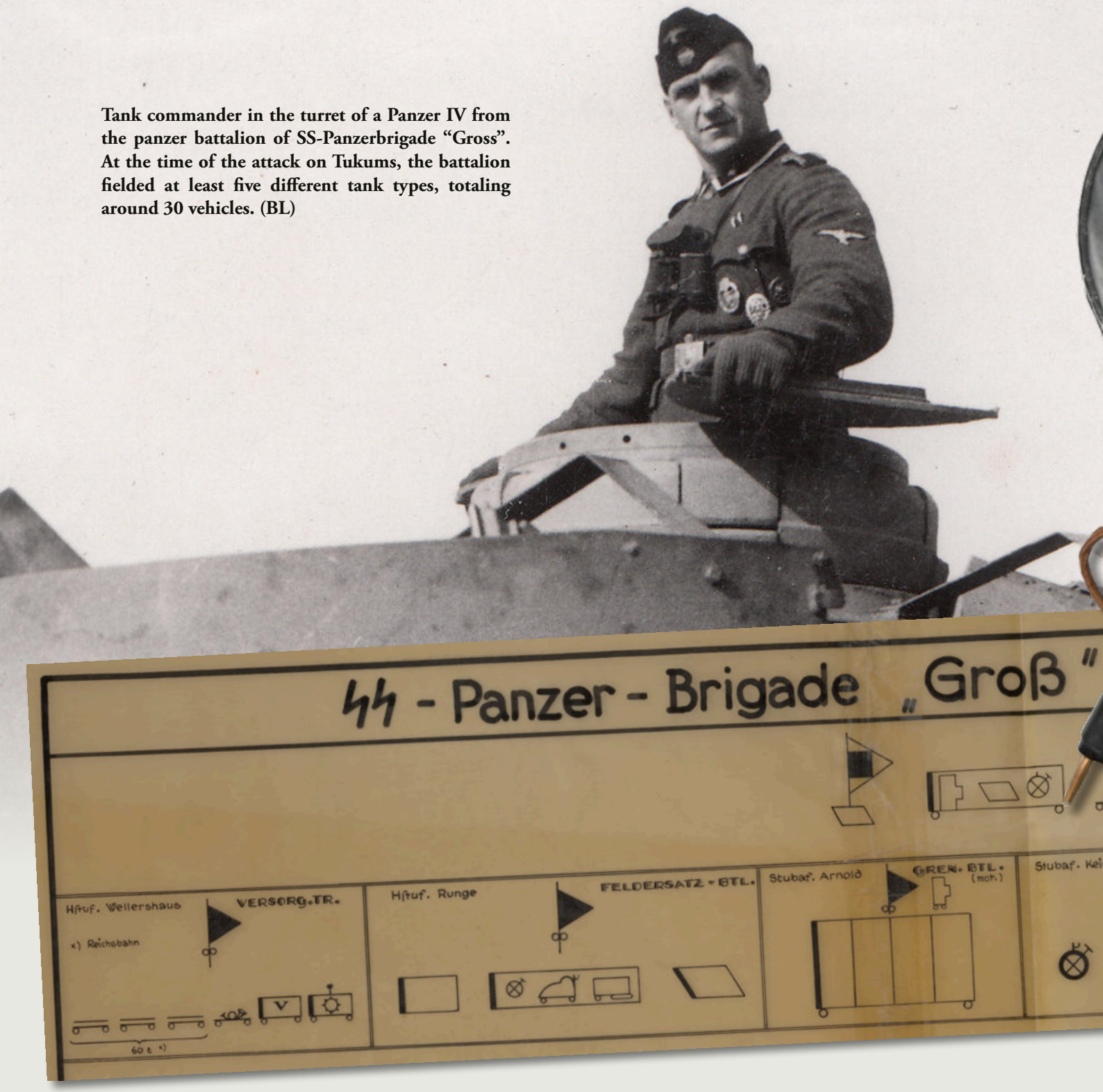
operation was named Doppelkopf and was to be carried out by *XXXIX. Panzer-Korps* and *XXXX. Panzer-Korps*.

The *XXXIX. Panzer-Korps*, consisting of 4., 5., and 12. Panzer-Divisionen under the leadership of General Dietrich von Saucken, was to break through toward Jelgava with flank protection to the north provided by *SS-Panzer-Brigade "Gross"*.

Simultaneously, the *XXXX. Panzer-Korps*, consisting of *Panzergrenadier-Division "Großdeutschland"* and 7. and 14. Panzer-Divisionen under the command of *General* Otto von Knobelsdorff, was to attack on the right flank toward Šiauliai. However, the German Panzer-Divisionen were a shadow of their former selves, with only 141 tanks and 54 assault guns at their disposal. After additional units were added, the final number reached 299 tanks and assault guns on 26 August.

These forces would face strong units from three Soviet armies: the 51st Army, the 2nd Guards Army, and the 43rd Army—all belonging to the 1st Baltic Front. Despite this, Hitler was convinced that the Panzer-Korps would succeed in their attacks against the Soviet armies' strong tank formations. He even went so far as to expand the operation to include an encirclement. After establishing a link with *Heeresgruppe Nord*, the troops were to turn south toward Kaunas and, together with infantry units from *Heeresgruppe Nord*, strike the rear of the Soviet units facing *3. Panzer-Armee*. Hitler expected that through this maneuver, two of his Panzer-Korps, supported by infantry from *Heeresgruppe Nord*, could encircle and crush several armies from the 1st Baltic Front and the 3rd Belorussian Front simultaneously.

Hyazinth von Strachwitz (1893–1968) was a prominent panzer officer who served in both World Wars. During his career, he held several key positions, including battalion commander in the 16. Panzer-Division, regimental commander in the Panzergrenadier-Division Großdeutschland, and battle group commander at the Gulf of Riga. For his actions at Uman, Kharkov, and Narva, he was awarded some of Nazi Germany's highest military decorations: the Knight's Cross, the Knight's Cross with Swords, and the highly exclusive Knight's Cross with Swords and Diamonds.



Tank commander in the turret of a Panzer IV from the panzer battalion of SS-Panzerbrigade "Gross". At the time of the attack on Tukums, the battalion fielded at least five different tank types, totaling around 30 vehicles. (BL)

The Plan

The offensive operation began at summer dawn on 16 August 1944. The 1st Baltic Front had not expected the attack and was literally caught off guard, allowing German panzer units to quickly break through Soviet lines in several places.

Despite this, some German units encountered stiff resistance. In the area northeast of Saldus, for example, *SS-Panzer-Brigade "Gross"*, tasked with protecting the northern flank of the attack, became bogged down in heavy fighting with units from the Red Army's 267th Rifle Division. To break through the Soviet positions, the *SS-Panzer-Brigade* was placed under the command of *Generalmajor* Hyazinth von Strachwitz, who arrived during the day with *101. Panzer-Brigade*, forming a task force from the two panzer brigades and two Latvian SS artillery battalions.

SS-Panzer-Brigade "Gross", under the command of *SS-Sturmbannführer* Martin Gross, consisted of a grenadier battalion equipped with armored personnel carriers, a panzer battalion equipped with at least five different types of tanks (approximately 30 in total), as well as a reconnaissance battalion and a field replacement battalion. *SS-Panzer-Brigade "Gross"* had been formed from training and replacement forces in con-

SS-Sturmbannführer Martin Gross, commander of SS-Panzer-Brigade Gross (an ad hoc armored brigade formed from armored, reconnaissance, and training units) at a troop training ground near Dundaga in Courland. The brigade comprised a grenadier battalion equipped with armored personnel carriers, a tank battalion, a reconnaissance battalion, and a field replacement battalion. (NARA)

nection with the Red Army's advance toward the Gulf of Riga.

The *101. Panzer-Brigade*, commanded by *Oberst* Richard Schmidtgen, consisted of *Panzer-Abteilung 2101* with 36 Panther tanks (Ausführung G) and *Panzergrenadier-Bataillon 2101* with approximately 70 armored personnel carriers (SPW). The *101. Panzer-Brigade* had been established on 21 July 1944, and was intended to form the core of *18. Panzergrenadier-Division*, which had suffered heavy losses, but the plan had been canceled due to the low number of returning soldiers.

Strachwitz was tasked with attacking from the area northeast of Saldus at dawn on 18 August, breaking through the Red Army's frontline at Bērzupe to advance rapidly toward Džūkste. Strachwitz was then to capture Tukums from the southeast. After capturing Tukums, *101. Panzer-Brigade* and *SS-Panzer-Brigade "Gross"* were to turn east and advance toward Riga to establish contact with *Heeresgruppe Nord*.

The advance of *101. Panzer-Brigade* was to be supported by Latvian artillery batteries from *19. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS (lettische Nr. 2)*. The motorized light artillery batteries from III. Bataillon of *SS-Artillerie-Regiment 19* would then be attached to *SS-Panzer-Brigade "Gross"* to advance closely behind the brigade and support the attack on Tukums. The heavier batteries from IV. Bataillon of *SS-Artillerie-Regiment 19* were intended to follow the advance. Flank protection to the south would be provided by a task force consisting of Latvian SS training battalions under the command of *SS-Standartenführer* Heino Hierthes.

Panther tanks belonging to the Panzergrenadier Division Großdeutschland in intense combat with Soviet units from the 5th Guards Tank Army at Šiauliai, which the Red Army had redirected to halt the German advance. (TG)

Delays and Resistance

Strachwitz could not begin the attack on 18 August 1944, because he could not get the units forward by rail in time. The attack was therefore postponed by one day. Meanwhile, south of Strachwitz's attack area, the German Panzer-Divisionen became stuck in prolonged battles with Soviet anti-tank, infantry, and tank units.

The Red Army, which had not expected the German offensive, reacted quickly. The attacking units hastily shifted to defense and established anti-tank fronts, while the 1st Baltic Front redirected units from the 5th Tank Army and the 6th Guards Army against the German attacks.

In addition to the stubborn Soviet resistance, the German panzer units attacked on too broad a front and in unfavorable terrain. This resulted in *XXXIX. Panzer-Korps'* attack toward Jelgava being halted halfway, while *XXXX. Panzer-Korps* was forced to fight heavy battles against superior forces west of Šiauliai.

Strachwitz, armed with a Sturmgewehr, scouts the terrain before the attack on 19 August 1944. He established a reputation for boldness as a cavalry officer during the First World War, and during the Second World War, he earned both his nickname "the Panzer Count" and his legendary status as a tank commander.

Strachwitz Breaks Through

At this critical moment, when the entire operation had more or less ground to a halt, Strachwitz reported that he had begun his attack with approximately 60 tanks.

The attack, carried out with *101. Panzer-Brigade* and the *SS-Panzer-Brigade's* panzergrenadier battalion in the lead, hit the 846th Rifle Regiment, which was defending the sector at Biksti, with full force. The rifle regiment's positions were knocked out one by one, struck by the lethal volleys of the German Panther tanks, while the panzergrenadiers tore up Soviet pockets of resistance.

The 267th Rifle Division, to which the regiment belonged, found it difficult to mount counter-measures because the division was defending a sector of nearly 50 kilometers, allowing Strachwitz's tanks to quickly continue their advance eastward toward the railway station at the small Latvian community of Bērzupe without difficulty. Dust billowed behind the tanks and armored vehicles as they rolled forward through the hot late summer day.

SS-Panzer-Brigade "Gross" followed *101. Panzer-Brigade*, which acted as the lead unit. The panzer brigades fought their way to the Bērzupe railway station before day turned to evening. Simultaneously, Hierthes' task force, providing flank protection to the south, attacked and captured the village of Upesmuiža. Strachwitz's advance was facilitated by the fact that the Soviet staffs had their attention fixed on the German Panzer-Korps' advance in the south toward Jelgava and Šiauliai, and redirected no heavy reinforcements to the sector at the Gulf of Riga, which was defended by units from three rifle divisions.

The Second Day of Battle

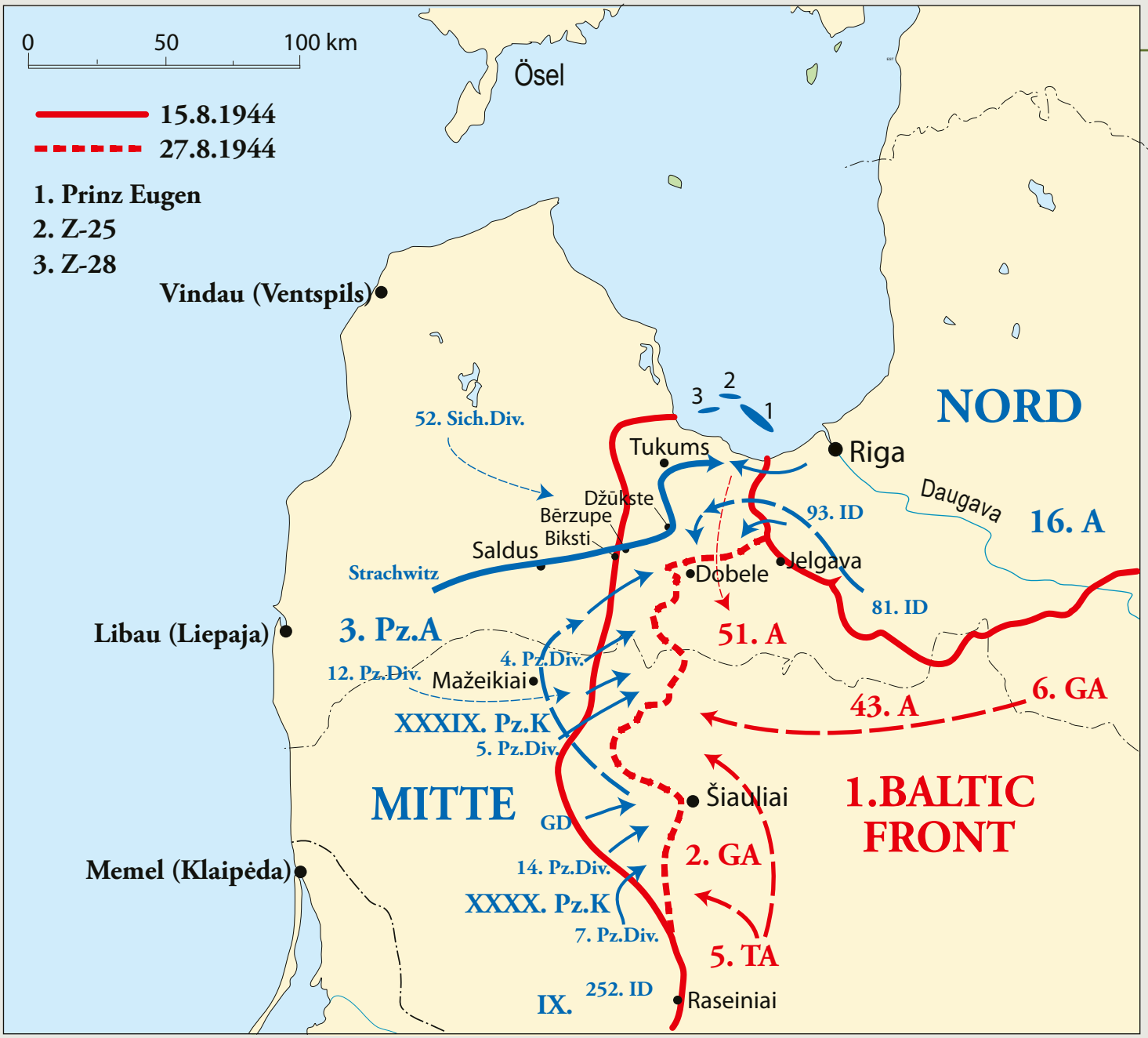
Successes continued the following day, 20 August. After Strachwitz reached the first objective at Bērzupe, he quickly redeployed *101. Panzer-Brigade* to the left and *SS-Panzer-Brigade "Gross"* to the right. The grenadier battalion belonging to *SS-Panzer-Brigade "Gross"* was returned to the brigade.

The two panzer brigades were then set in motion at dawn toward the northeast on both sides of the Tempji–Rumbas–Pienava road. The guns of the Latvian motorized artillery battalion under the command of *Waffen-Hauptsturmführer* Janis Ozols, tasked with following *101. Panzer-Brigade*, quickly followed the panzer brigade's tanks and supported their advance with well-aimed artillery fire. Latvian forward observers following the spearhead of the attack, in consultation with German panzer officers, directed fire via radio from the panzer brigade's tanks and armored personnel carriers.

Strachwitz's tanks and armored personnel carriers rolled, with air support, at full speed toward the rail-

German Panzergrenadiers mounted in an armored personnel carrier (Sd.Kfz. 251/D) during the advance toward Tukums in August 1944. (AF)

Panzergrenadiers scout the terrain before the next offensive movement. Panzergrenadiers scout the terrain before the next offensive movement. (AF)



way between Tukums and Jelgava, regardless of the obvious flank threat. Upon reaching the railway, they quickly turned northwest.

Strachwitz's rapid advance came as a great surprise to the Soviet 51st Army. The Russians could not determine the location of the German tanks that had previously attacked at Biksti. Early in the morning, the tanks and armored personnel carriers even passed not far from the headquarters of the 1st Guards Rifle Corps at Kazupe, but they were unnoticed due to the morning mist. At 07:00, Strachwitz reported via radio that the railway station at Džūkste, despite heavy enemy resistance, had been captured by his units.

Fire Support from the Navy

Strachwitz then issued the order: "Attack Tukums!" As support for the offensive advance, Strachwitz received fire support from a naval task force consisting of the heavy cruiser Prinz Eugen, four destroyers, and nine torpedo boats, which had entered the Gulf of Riga on 20 August 1944. This was the first time a unit from Heeresgruppe Mitte had ever received support from naval vessels. Prinz Eugen fired 284 shells of 20.3 cm caliber against Soviet units at and artillery positions north of Tukums to clear the way for Strachwitz's tanks and armored personnel carriers.

The effect was enormous, both practically and psychologically, and the Kriegsmarine thus played a very important role in Strachwitz's continued advance along the road and railway toward Tukums. The tanks and armored personnel carriers of the two panzer brigades advanced at a furious pace, while the naval task force subjected Soviet rifle and artillery positions at Tukums to heavy shelling. The fire was directed from reconnaissance aircraft.

1. 07:00 – 20.8.44: Strachwitz reported via radio that the station at Dzukste had been captured by his unit, despite fierce enemy resistance.
2. 08:55 - 20.8.44: Strachwitz reported that his forces had reached Slampe, a mere 15 kilometers from Tukums.
3. 10:05 - 20.8.44: Strachwitz's combat group reached Tukums.
4. 12:35 – 20.8.44: Strachwitz reported that Tukums had been captured by his forces.
5. 20.8.44 - The 15th Guards Tank Regiment, the 335th and 1102nd Self-Propelled Gun Regiments, and the 267th Rifle Division launched an assault, cutting off Strachwitz's advance and the supply corridor at Rumbas. Despite this, Strachwitz pressed on with his offensive, having secured the opportunity to refuel at Tukums.

To support Strachwitz's armored assault near the Gulf of Riga, the heavy cruiser Prinz Eugen entered the Gulf of Riga. Prinz Eugen, which was launched in 1938 and commissioned after the outbreak of the war in August 1940, had a main armament consisting of eight 20.3 cm guns.

Waffen-Hauptsturmführer Janis Ozols, commander of III./SS-Art.Rgt.19. (PK)

At 07:42, Strachwitz reported that his forces were continuing along the railway, and at 08:55, he announced that they had reached Slampe, just 15 kilometers from Tukums! A Latvian *SS-Kriegsberichter* participating in the attack described the rapid advance as follows:

> During the advance, a number of the enemy's anti-tank units and supply convoys are knocked out. Along the entire road, burnt-out cars, destroyed artillery pieces, and the carcasses of horses and enemy soldiers are visible. Near a dairy used by the Bolsheviks as a headquarters, camels are tied up. They are undisturbed by the noise of the battle and continue to eat the oats that have not yet been harvested. There is no time to linger here. Continue forward with determination! That is the motto! The tempo of the attack is facilitated by the Bolsheviks abandoning fully functional vehicles. The men climb aboard and load their weapons with ammunition.
>
> The attack continues. At a location near Tukums, the Bolsheviks offer stronger resistance. With heavy automatic fire, they open fire from positions hidden in a cornfield. A couple of anti-tank guns also open fire on us. The resistance is quickly overcome, and around 10:00 on 20 August, the first tank rolls into Tukums.

At 10:05, the panzer and panzergrenadier units reached Tukums, whereupon the German panzergrenadiers immediately dismounted from their armored personnel carriers and moved into the city, which was defended by units of the 417th Rifle Division. The city was captured quickly, and at 12:35, Strachwitz reported that Tukums was in the hands of the task force.

The Red Army left the city head over heels, leaving behind vast amounts of equipment. Strachwitz's panzer task force had achieved the feat of advancing 65 kilometers behind enemy lines in two days and capturing Tukums. Contrary to later myths about the fighting, the panzer task force did not encounter any Soviet tank units, and Prinz Eugen did not destroy a large number of tanks.

German tank losses, however, were high - less due to enemy action than to technical difficulties with the brand-new and untested Panther tanks. After the capture of Tukums, the attack continued eastward with the goal of establishing contact with *16. Armee* and *Heeresgruppe Nord.*

While Strachwitz's attack continued in the Latvian summer sun, Soviet infantry and tank units from the 15th Guards Tank Regiment, the 335th Guards Heavy [Self-Propelled Gun Regiment], and the 1102nd Self-Propelled Gun Regiment, as well as the 267th Rifle Division, launched counterattacks with the intention of cutting off his advance and severing the supply line. The Soviet countermeasures succeeded in cutting the supply corridor at Rumbas and Bikste, but despite this, Strachwitz continued his attack as he was able to refuel at Tukums.

Strachwitz's deep offensive movement led the commander of the Soviet 51st Army, Lieutenant General Yakov Kreizer, to finally order a retreat. The 267th and 417th Rifle Divisions managed to withdraw southward, but the bulk of the 346th Rifle Division did not have time to retreat from Ķemeri, about 30 kilometers west of Riga, before Strachwitz's task force reached the area. Heavy fighting broke out in the forested area near the town as the soldiers of the rifle division offered violent resistance to the German assault forces. Strachwitz acted quickly by deploying the *SS-Panzergrenadier-Bataillon* from *SS-Panzer-Brigade "Gross"*, which

in intense fighting tore through the Soviet resistance and opened the road for further advancement eastward. Large parts of the 346th Rifle Division were encircled and destroyed in the marshlands during the battles at Ķemeri. Strachwitz's panzer units then reached Riga. The connection between the two army groups had been re-established.

Setbacks in the South

Meanwhile, both XXXX. and XXXIX. Panzer-Korps failed to break through the Red Army's frontline in the south due to insufficient flank protection from infantry units, a lack of air support, and delays in fuel supply. This led 3. Panzer-Armee to call off the offensive operation on 27 August.

The offensive operation had lasted twelve days and spanned a sector 180 kilometers wide and 50 kilometers deep. The grand attack with two Panzer-Korps, which the German High Command had hoped would eliminate several major Soviet troop formations and close the gap between *Heeresgruppe Nord* and *Heeresgruppe Mitte*, resulted only in Strachwitz's task force succeeding in establishing a narrow and vulnerable corridor along the Gulf of Riga.

Strategically, Operation Doppelkopf was a failure, as the two Panzer-Korps' attacks in the south did not lead to a breakthrough. However, it could be argued that their attacks tied down significant Soviet forces, giving Strachwitz's assault units enough maneuver space to reach *Heeresgruppe Nord*.

Operationally, however, Operation Doppelkopf was a success because the connection to *Heeresgruppe Nord* was established. Panzer Count Hyazinth von Strachwitz's attack in the late summer of 1944 is an excellent example of the operational success that even a small unit can achieve under determined leadership.

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Special thanks to former artillery forward observer, Oscha. Olgerts Mentelis, veteran of the battle, who provided invaluable details regarding the course of combat.

Petter Kjellander

Photo of Per Dahl Nielsen, autumn 1942.

The Soldier Without a Grave: The Story of Per Dahl Nielsen

"Per Dahl Nielsen gave his life to save Europe and the North from Communism, which was about to cross the border. Honor the memory of Per."

These words are written in elegant script on the back of a black-and-white photograph of a young man.

Who was he?

His full name was Knud Per Dahl Nielsen, born in Copenhagen on March 6, 1918. He trained as a shop assistant, likely serving his apprenticeship in his father's paint shop.

The Royal Life Guards

On May 9, 1938, Per Dahl Nielsen was conscripted into the Danish Defense, serving in the Royal Life Guards. On October 15, 1938, he was sent to the Corporal School to train as a non-commissioned officer. He was successful in his training, later attaining the rank of Under-Corporal, and was discharged on April 15, 1940, with the rank of Corporal.

On July 20, 1939, he had joined the Danish Nazi Party, the DNSAP. Due to high unemployment in Denmark, he sought work in Germany. On September 13, 1940, he registered an address at Hindenburgstrasse 18 in Hamburg, subsequently working as a steward on a train.

The Eastern Front

World War II changed course on June 22, 1941, when Nazi Germany launched its attack on the Soviet Union. With this invasion, the Germans opened recruitment for volunteers in occupied countries, including Denmark. On June 29, 1941, Frikorps Danmark (Free Corps Denmark) was established.

Per Dahl Nielsen had returned to Denmark on March 10, 1941. On August 2, 1941, he submitted his enlistment form for Frikorps Danmark. That same day, he attended a recruitment session in Nykøbing Falster and signed a contract binding him for the duration of the war. He was assigned to the 1st Company and issued identity disc (Erkennungsmarke): 1.kp Freikorps Danmark -139-.

Entrance to the Langenhorn barracks.

Training

Per Dahl Nielsen was sent for training at the Langenhorn barracks, where the rest of Frikorps Danmark was stationed. In mid-September 1941, they were transferred to Treskau in present-day Poland. It was during their time in Treskau that the corps received a new commander well-known from the Life Guards: C.F. von Schalburg, who took over from C.P. Kryssing in February 1942.

Between May 6 and 8, 1942, Frikorps Danmark was deployed to the Demyansk Pocket. German units had been encircled there since February 1942, until a corridor was breached in April. Up until then, the only way to supply the 90,000 men was by air. Frikorps Danmark was tasked with holding the narrow corridor—the only land connection in and out of the pocket.

The unit saw its "baptism of fire" on May 20, 1942, when the Soviets attempted to close the pocket again. Units from the 1st Company were heavily engaged in fierce fighting within the swampy forests. Per Dahl Nielsen participated in the battles on May 20, and the fighting continued through the following day.

Wounded in Action

On May 21, 1942, during the heavy fighting, Rottenführer Per Dahl Nielsen was shot in the leg and the lung. He was transported to the main clearing station in Losnitzy and later moved by hospital train to Riga, Latvia.

On June 2, 1942, he and several other Danes were transported to a reserve hospital, Schlochau, in Stettin. Coincidentally, this was the same date his old comrade from the Life Guards, C.F. von Schalburg, fell in Demyansk. On May 26, 1942, Per was awarded the Iron Cross 2nd Class and promoted to Unterscharführer.

On June 4, 1942, he wrote to his mother from the hospital in Stettin:

> Dear Mother,
>
> I have finally returned to a hospital in Germany; things are going very well. I've been allowed to hop around on a pair of crutches, but it probably won't be many days before I can discard them. The shot I took went straight through without hitting the bone and is healing quickly. On the other hand, my

Soldiers of the Frikorps Danmark in January 1943. Per Dahl Nielsen, with his hand inside his jacket.

The swamps of Demyansk, 1942.

Min kære Mand og bedste Ven,
ff-Oberscharführer
Per Dahl-Nielsen
Indehaver af Jernkorset II Kl. og Partiets Æresemblem for Frontkæmpere, er den 13. Februar 1944 faldet ved Narva.
Tro mod din Ed.
Lille Rigborg og Gerda Dahl-Nielsen.

Obituary from the newspaper Fædrelandet.

Grave crosses in Siivertsi/Narva.

chest will likely take some time; I was lucky there too, as it hit neither lungs nor heart. However, it broke a couple of ribs and left a hole in me like a blowpipe, but everything is going as it should.

Convalescence and Return to the Front

In the summer of 1942, he returned to Denmark on convalescent leave. The rest of Frikorps Danmark returned on September 8, 1942, for a leave period marked by civil unrest and brawls.

The leave ended on October 13, 1942. Per Dahl Nielsen remained in Denmark until December 1942, when he was sent to Bobruisk as part of the Corps' Reserve (Ersatz) Company. His time there was brief; in January 1943, he was sent back to his old unit, the 1st Company. He participated in the battles of early 1943 before the unit was withdrawn from the front in March.

In May 1943, Frikorps Danmark was reorganized into Regiment Danmark as part of the Nordland Division. In early autumn 1943, Per Dahl Nielsen returned to Denmark briefly to attend the Schalburg School in Høvelte. By the end of 1943, he had returned to Regiment Danmark, then stationed in Croatia.

Siivertsi

By 1944, German forces were under pressure on all fronts. On January 14, the Soviets launched an offensive in the Oranienbaum sector, pushing the Germans back to the Estonian town of Narva by February 2. During the winter, the Soviets made several attempts to cross the frozen Narva River.

On February 12, 1944, Soviet forces crossed the ice at Riigi and Siivertsi, north of Narva. The Soviets knew that gaining a foothold here would allow them to cut off the town. The fighting was exceptionally brutal, particularly in the old cemetery at Siivertsi, where gravestones and crosses were used as cover against the hail of bullets.

The Death of Per Dahl Nielsen

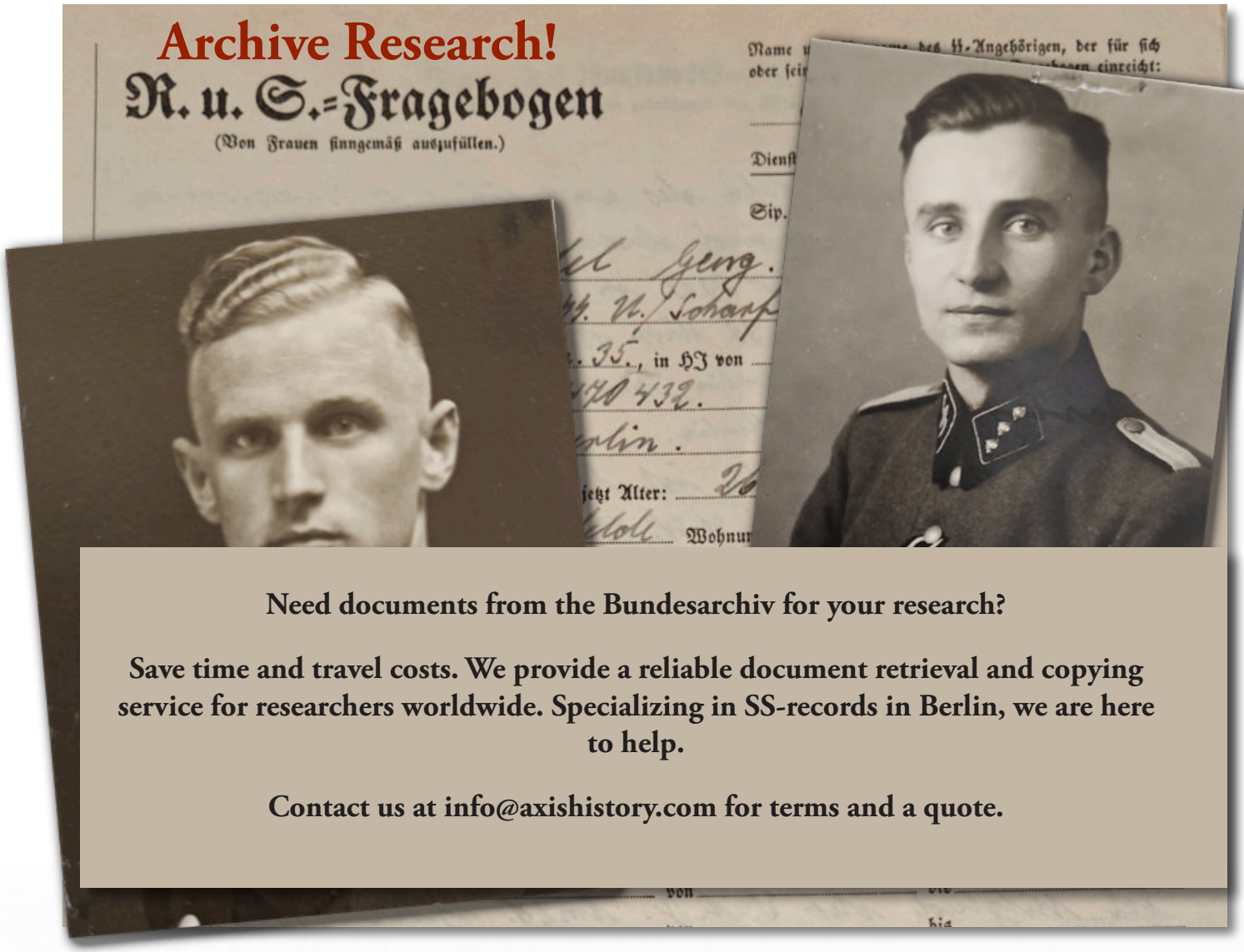
On February 13, 1944, alone, fourteen Danes from Regiment Danmark were killed. Oberscharführer Per Dahl Nielsen was among them. He was mortally wounded by a shot to the head and died shortly after.

Though the German forces and their allies eventually managed to repel the Soviet attack, the cost was high. Per Dahl Nielsen's family was notified of his death, and in May 1944, an obituary was published in the National Socialist newspaper Fædrelandet.

Per Dahl Nielsen's body was never recovered.

Lars Larsen

Archive Research!



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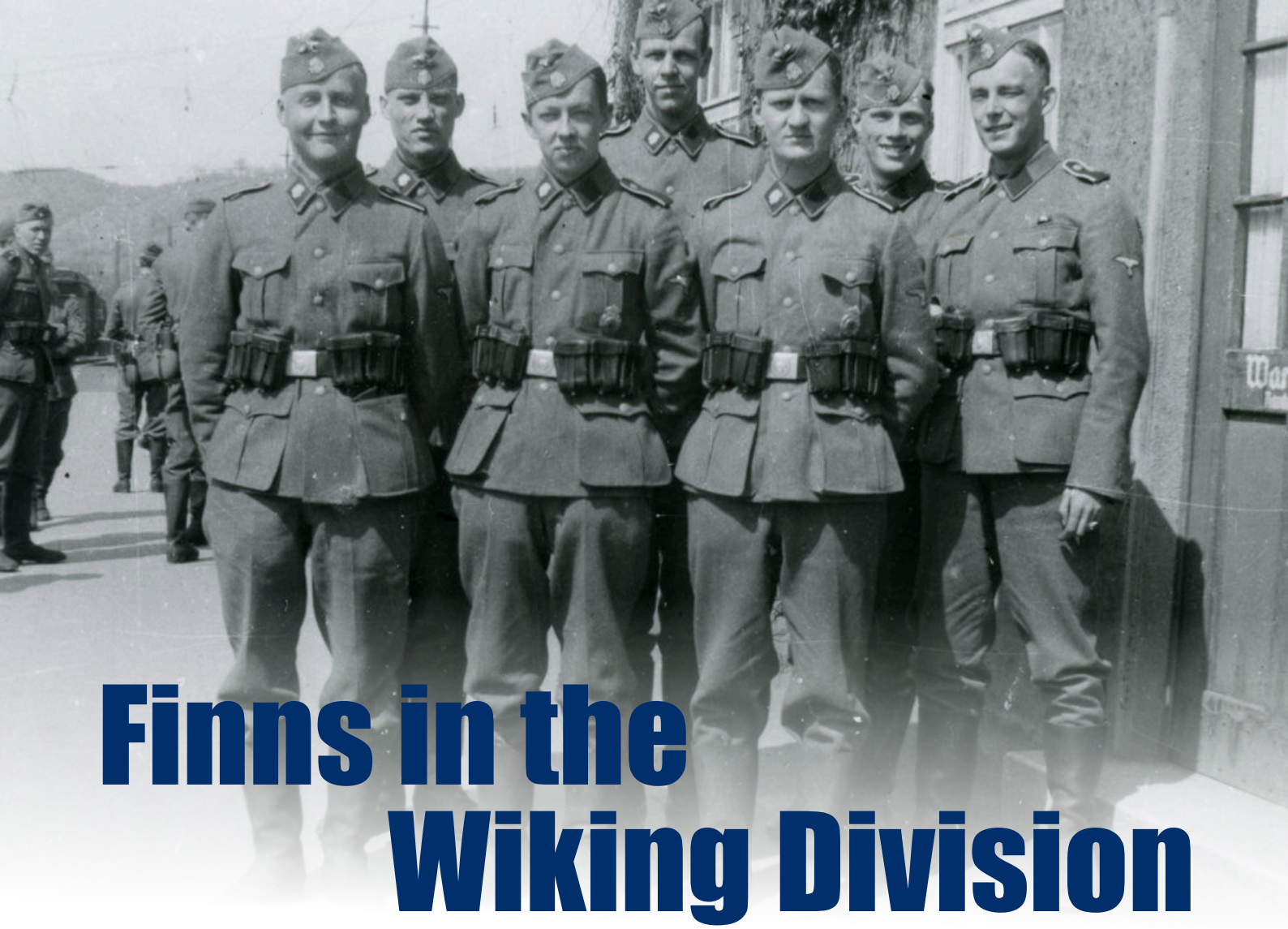


Finns in the Wiking Division

Between 1941 and 1943, approximately 1,400 Finns served in the Wiking Division. More than 400 of them were already deployed when Germany invaded the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941. Simultaneously, about 800 men received training in the Finnish Volunteer Battalion of the Waffen-SS (Finnisches Freiwilligen-Bataillon der Waffen-SS), established on June 15, 1941. The Finnish battalion assumed front-line responsibility at the turn of the year 1941–42 and, as part of the Nordland Regiment, advanced to the Caucasus following the winter stalemate. The Finnish battalion (III./Nordland) suffered heavy casualties during the battles of autumn 1942 and was reinforced by a replacement company of about 200 men from Finland. In the spring of 1943, the battalion was withdrawn from the front, and when the two-year service commitment was completed in the summer of 1943, the men returned to Finland. The first part of this article series focuses on the 431 Finns who were with the Wiking Division from the summer of 1941.

Finland as a Co-belligerent of Germany

Following the Winter War of 1939–40, Finland entered a period of great uncertainty. Political relations with the Soviet Union were strained, and when the USSR occupied the Baltic states in the summer of 1940, Finland feared a similar fate. Finland seized an opening opportunity and sought cooperation with Germany; the nation did not wish to return to the isolation it faced before the Winter War. As part of this cooperation, volunteers were sent from Finland to Germany to receive military training in modern warfare. The project carried the blessing of Finland's highest state leadership, and its costs were covered by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Professor Mauno Jokipii (1924–2007), who conducted the only scientifically rigorous research on the subject in the 1960s, referred to the group as the "Finnish Foreign Ministry's Representative Battalion." The situation was thus distinct from countries like Denmark and Norway, which were occupied by Germany. In the spring of 1941, the project had to be kept secret, as its revelation would have further strained relations between Finland and the Soviet Union. Under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, still in effect at the time, Finland was defined as being within the Soviet sphere of influence. Recruitment was entrusted to private parties and led by Esko Riekki, the former head of the State Police. The national recruitment center was established at the Ratas

Opposite: This photograph was taken by Martti Uusi-Jaakkola (9./Westland) at the Tübingen railway station on May 17, 1941. The Finnish volunteers are pictured en route from Stralsund to Heuberg (Truppenübungsplatz und das Lager Heuberg). Having just received their uniforms in Stralsund, the men are still wearing the "death's head" (Totenkopf) collar patches, which were removed shortly thereafter. Front row, from left: Seppo Backberg (Art. 5), Matti Autio (FFB), Martti Koivula (FLAK), and Paavo Koivuvaara (FLAK). Back row, from left: Tero Riekki, Teuvo Hatara (Germania), and an unidentified volunteer. All the identified volunteers are officers. Notably, Autio and Koivula are wearing the Finnish Pilot's Badge m/18, as both served as graduated observers in the Finnish Air Force.

engineering office in Helsinki, partially owned by Harry Backberg. Approximately 200 recruiters operated across Finland, sending 1,900 volunteers to Helsinki for screening, of whom 1,200 were accepted.

The project had strong ties to the Jäger Movement of World War I, and many recruiters were themselves Jägers. More than 30 of their sons enlisted, and the volunteers were often referred to as the "New Jägers." The initial hope was to form a Finnish Jäger tradition unit within the Wehrmacht, but as this was not possible, the Finns were attached to the Wiking Division of the Waffen-SS, which had been established in December 1940. The Finns were transported to Germany in five contingents in May and June 1941. Men with combat experience were selected from the first three contingents to be sent directly to the Wiking Division as it prepared for war.

Placement of Finns within the Wiking Division

The table is indicative, as Finns were frequently transferred between different units during the early stages.

Unit	Officers	NCO/EM	Total
Rgt.Germania	9		9
Rgt.Nordland	7	188	195
Rgt.Westland	5	79	84
Aufkl.Abt.5	4	40	44
Pz.Jg.Abt.5	4	47	51
Art.Rgt.5	8		8
Flak.Abt.5	5	7	12
Pi.Btl.5	2		2
Nachschub		24	
Workshop Co		1	1
Total	44	386	430

Finnish volunteers in Tübingen, May 17, 1941. Pictured from right to left are Veijo Vauhkonen (1919–1996), 7./Westland; Leo Lappalainen (1918–2002), 2./Westland; Väinö Malminen (1914–2005), 10./Westland; Tapio Gröndahl (1918–1944), 3./Westland, KIA 1944; Unto Hemmo (1914–1941), 1./Westland, KIA 1941; Olavi Kortelainen (1921–1944), 10./Westland, KIA 1944; Gösta Lundqvist (1912–1941), 5./Westland, KIA 1941; Eino Hautala (1914–1988), 11./Westland; Unto Parvilahti (1907–1970), 11./Westland; and Aulis Gröndahl (1922–1941), 3./Westland, KIA 1941.

Additionally, the group was joined by Ensio Pihkala (1915–1941), who had been studying theology in Berlin on a church scholarship. He became the Finnish field chaplain and liaison officer for the Wiking Division.

With the Wiking Division

In May 1941, the Finns were transported to Heuberg in Southern Germany, where they were assigned to various units within the Wiking Division. From there, the division was moved to present-day Poland to await Germany's declaration of war, which occurred on June 22, 1941. In his declaration, Adolf Hitler prematurely and without authorization claimed that Finland was also participating in the attack as an ally. Although Finns were present within the Wiking Division, Finland did not officially enter the war until a few days later. The Wiking Division's advance began shortly after the declaration of war, and the first Finns received their baptism of fire in early July. The division's combat path is well-documented in literature; the Finns participated in the summer battles from Taratsa and Boguslav to Dnepropetrovsk, and in the autumn offensive toward Rostov, until they settled into winter positions on the Mius River. It was at these winter po-

A brief respite from the fighting. Ustuf. Heikki Mansala is seen shaving while Ostuf. Jouko Itälä eats; both were officers with the Wiking Artillery Regiment.

sitions that the Finnish battalion arrived at the front and took over its sector. At this point, NCOs and officers serving in other Wiking units who could not be assigned positions corresponding to their ranks were repatriated to Finland, with only about a hundred remaining in the Finnish battalion.

Finnish Casualties

Of the Finns who served in various Wiking units in the summer of 1941, 82 men were lost between 1941 and 1943. Most died as a result of combat actions, though there were also fatal accidents and illnesses. Five Finns were taken as prisoners of war; only one returned to Finland after the war, while the other four died in captivity. Eight individuals are listed as missing, and no specific details of their fates have been recovered - they either fell in battle or were captured. An additional 10 men fell while serving with the Finnish battalion in 1942–43. Upon returning to Finland, approximately 300 of those who had served in the Wiking Division remained fit for duty. They continued their service in various units of the Finnish Army. More than 80 were ordered to officer training school - roughly one-third of those who were not yet officers. Some were also promoted to officer rank for military merit. In Finland, another 41 of these men fell in battle, bringing the total casualty rate from the original 431-man strength to over 30%.

After the War

Following the war, those who were disabled and unable to support themselves or their families faced the most difficult circumstances. The Finnish state, which had sent them to Germany, initially denied them disability pensions. In many cases, they survived on support collected for them by their brothers-in-arms until 1956, when Veljesapu Ry, a welfare organization founded by former SS men, succeeded in bringing them under the scope of the Military Injuries Act. Many Finns who served in the Wiking Division went on to hold prominent positions in post-war Finland.

SS-Hauptsturmführer Karl-Erik Ladau (1916–2009)

Karl-Erik Ladau was born in Tampere on June 3, 1916. He joined the Tampere Civil Guard in 1932. He completed his compulsory military service in the Tampere Regiment in 1936–37 and graduated as an officer from Reserve Officer Course No. 37. He served in the

SS-Hauptsturmführer Karl-Erik Ladau

Winter War with Infantry Regiment 7. Ladau, a reserve lieutenant living in Tampere, enlisted for Germany on April 23, 1941, and was sent in the first Finnish contingent from Turku to Danzig on May 6, 1941. He was one of nine Finnish officers who served in the Germania Regiment. When the Finnish battalion arrived at the front, he was given command of its 2nd Company, becoming the first Finn to hold a company commander's post. He was wounded five times on the Eastern Front and was one of the few Finns to receive the Wound Badge in Gold (Verwundetenabzeichen in Gold). He was also awarded the Iron Cross 1st and 2nd Class. Upon returning to Finland, Ladau continued his service as the commander of the 26th Gun Company of the 18th Division on the Karelian Isthmus. He rose to the rank of Major in the Finnish Army. After the wars, he continued his studies and earned a Master of Laws from the University of Helsinki in 1950, receiving the title of Varatuomari (trained on the bench) in 1954. He spent his career at the insurance company Varma, serving initially as a

SS-Untersturmführer Unto Parvilahti

SS-Untersturmführer Sulo Suorttanen

lawyer and later as assistant director. He was the CEO of Varma from 1958 to 1978 and Chairman of the Board from 1962 to 1980. Karl-Erik Ladau died in Tampere at the age of 93 on September 9, 2009.

SS-Untersturmführer Unto Parvilahti (1907–1970) (Boman until 1944)

Unto Parvilahti was born in Maaria on September 28, 1907. He moved to Helsinki at a young age and, after completing his military service in the late 1920s, served as an aerial photographer in the Air Force from 1933 to 1934 and during the Winter War. Parvilahti was a member of the National Socialist Samfundet Folkgemenskap. He enlisted in Helsinki on April 21, 1941, and was sent in the first contingent to Danzig on May 6, 1941. He participated in the invasion of the Soviet Union with the Westland Regiment in June and July 1941, but his time at the front was short; in July 1941, he was sent to Berlin to assist the Finnish military attaché, helping manage the backlog of field mail. This operation later became the Finnish Volunteer Battalion's Liaison Office (Verbindungstelle), which handled mail, leave, and entertainment for the Finns. While serving in Berlin, Parvilahti was promoted to officer rank without attending officer school. The office ceased operations in early 1944, and Parvilahti returned to Finland. After Finland broke relations with Germany in the autumn, he was arrested and, in April 1945, handed over to the Soviet Union. He was sentenced to five years in a correctional camp for participating in counter-revolutionary activities. After serving his sentence, he was exiled to Siberia and was only able to return to Finland in December 1954, following Stalin's death. Upon his return, he worked as a businessman and, in 1957, wrote a memoir of his experiences in the Soviet Union titled Berijan tarhat (Beria's Orchards). The book became a bestseller, going through 11 editions in Finland until President Urho Kekkonen reached an agreement with the publisher

Otava in 1959 to cease further printing for political reasons. The book was translated into Swedish (1958), English (1959), German (1960), and Spanish (1961). Parvilahti received 4.6 million marks in compensation from the Finnish state for his illegal imprisonment, equivalent to approximately 200,000 euros today. Suffering from health issues, he moved to Spain in 1961, where he died at age 63 on October 27, 1970. The Prosecutor General's Office of the Russian Federation rehabilitated Parvilahti on its own initiative on May 21, 2001.

SS-Untersturmführer Sulo Suorttanen (1921–2005)

Sulo Suorttanen was born on February 13, 1921, in Valkeala. He joined the Civil Guard in 1937. During the Winter War, he served on the home front as a driver. As a reserve corporal, he enlisted in Kouvola on May 5, 1941, and was sent in the third contingent to Danzig on May 23, 1941. He was initially assigned to Flak 5 (Anti-aircraft) but soon transferred to Nachschubführer 5. He was severely wounded by shell splinters in Dnepropetrovsk on September 19, 1941. After a long recovery, Suorttanen was sent to the SS-Junkerschule Bad Tölz, where he attended the 9th War Jäger Course (Kriegs-Junker-Lehrgang) in 1942–43. He returned to Finland on September 28, 1943, and continued his service with Infantry Regiment 8, eventually rising to the rank of Major. After the war, he continued his studies and became a Varatuomari in 1954. He served as a Member of Parliament (1962–70, 1972–75) and served as Finland's Minister of Defence from 1966 to 1970. Sulo Suorttanen died in Kouvola at the age of 84 on September 24, 2005.

The next part of this article series will cover the experiences of the Finns who served in the Finnish Volunteer Battalion.

Mika Hakanpää

Philipp Wild

Narva Defender: The Life and Career of Philipp Wild

Philipp Wild was born on March 28, 1921, as the son of Johann Heinrich Wild and his wife Elisabeth in Dornheim near Darmstadt, Hesse. From the age of six to fourteen, he attended elementary school in his hometown. On April 16, 1933, he joined the Jungvolk and transitioned to the Hitler Youth in 1935. After leaving school on March 1st, 1934, he trained as a merchant (kaufmann). Upon completing his three-year apprenticeship, he passed the assistant merchant exam on September 23, 1938, with a "good" rating and received his assistant merchant certificate. He then worked as an assistant merchant in small town Groß-Gerau for Hermann Wirthwein in his store "J.Wirthwein" until January 1, 1939 when he started work for another business owner Paul Hungsberg in his store "P. Hungsberg" in Rüsselsheim. Then he made a decision to voluntarily join SS-VT as a driver in Pz.Abw. Abt under command of SS-Hstuf. Adolf Ax on September 10, 1939. He took part in the Western campaign and was wounded near Hazebrouck in northern France on May 10 (or May 19 according to Jurgen Karl) 1940. He went into a Hospital in Remagen where he recovered until June 16, and finally he ended up in Plauen's hospital.

After recovering on July 7th 1940, he was assigned to the SS Panzerjäger Replacement Battalion as a driver in Arolsen under the command of SS-Hstuf. Herbert Oeck. He then volunteered again for frontline duty and on July 24, he was wounded again and admitted to the hospital in Bad Wildungen. On August 9, he was awarded Wound Badge in Black (Verwundetenabzeichen schwarz) and was promoted to SS-Sturmmann on October 1, 1940.

On November 25, 1940, he was transferred to the 14 (Flak.) Kp./SS-Inf. Rgt "Nordland"/ 5.SS-Division "Wiking" in Vienna under the command of SS-Hstuf. Hoffmann. With the "Nordland", he participated in Operation "Barbarossa" as driver, receiving a promotion to SS-Rottenführer on October 1, 1941. Wild took part in the fighting during the division's march from Zhytomyr in the direction of Radomyshl. The "Nordland" Regiment successfully completed its assigned task of clearing this section of the road from enemy units and rejoined the rest of the division on the march toward Kiev.

Then he fought with his company on its way through Bila Tserkva and continued south toward the Dnieper. On August 21, the advance detachments had already reached Dniprodzerzhynsk. Wild took part in the heavy fighting for Dnepropetrovsk. The regiment, after a month of continuous combat, managed to cross the Dnieper River and establish a bridgehead on its eastern bank. This allowed other divisional units to cross as well, ultimately enabling the capture of the city by storm on September 7, 1941.

The next engagement for Philipp was the Battle of Rostov-on-Don. The Germans eventually had to withdraw from the city and conduct tough defensive ac-

Wild (first from right) as a gun commander along with his comrades during summer 1942

tions along the Mius River during the harsh winter, suffering from a severe shortage of warm clothing and other supplies.

Next his appointment was as an SS-Unterscharführer on April 1, 1942 and then he was appointed as a gun commander. On May 5, 1942, he went on leave but did not return to his old unit but was instead transferred to II Abt./SS-Rgt. "Nordland" under the command of SS-Hstuf. Weitzdörfer

By the summer of 1942, a new German offensive began. Rostov was retaken, the Don River was crossed, and the division then embarked on a long march across the southern steppes of the Soviet Union with the objective of seizing the Caucasus. As part of Kampfgruppe "Weitzdörfer", he fought in the battles for Ssambek in July 1942 and then in fighting for Kropotkin. On August 5, the following was broadcast from the Führer Headquarters as part of the Wehrma-

Wild as a driver during summer 1941 with comrades from his Kp.

cht Daily Report: "After heavy fighting, the important railway junction at Krapotkin on the Kuban was taken by storm by a formation of the Waffen-SS." It was done by elements of Regiment “Nordland” including Wild’s company. Soon on August 28, he earned Iron Cross 2nd Class (E.K.II. Klasse) and then Eastern Front Medal (Medaille "Winterschlacht im Osten") on September 10.

During the operation, the 2nd Battalion distinguished itself in fierce fighting around Malgobek, but despite the successes, “Nordland”as a whole suffered enormous personnel losses. After months of defensive fighting, the German retreat from the Caucasus began. Wild was awarded at that time on November 15 Infantry Assault Badge in bronze (Infanterie-Sturmabzeichen (bronze). A withdrawal that the SS-Rgt. “Nordland”, among others, was tasked with covering. We don’t know the reason why Wild was withdrawn from the front during the intense fighting on the Eastern Front, but at the end of January 1943 he left his unit.

All of Philipp Wild's subsequent military career would be connected with the III SS-Pz.Corps, which was formed on March 30, 1943. It was to this corps, specifically to the newly forming panzer regiment, that Philipp was transferred. At this time he received Driver's Badge in Bronze on April 15, 1943.

Formation on the new regiment officially began on July 1, 1943 at the Grafenwöhr training grounds in Bavaria, where SS-Stubaf. Paul-Albert Kausch, a veteran of the “Wiking” like Philipp, began organizing SS-Pz.Abt. 11

The core of experienced officers and NCOs had mostly served in “Wiking”, as had Wild. Infantry training was soon completed, after which most soldiers proceeded to specialized training at the Pz.-Lehr-Abt. in Erlangen, the tank factory in Nuremberg, the Armor School in Wünsdorf, and the tank gunnery school in Putlos. Tank training initially involved older Pz. III and Pz. IV tanks. According to photographs from Philipp’s album, he definitely trained on the Pz.III. Additional courses included map-reading and radio communications training.

After the three-month formation period, a decision was made to transfer the III SS-Pz. Corps to Croatia. At that time, the tank crews' armament was limited to personal firearms only, as no tanks or assault guns had yet been delivered, and the necessary transport vehicles were also absent. Pz.Abt. (it will never be a regiment officially) was transferred from Grafenwöhr to Croatia, to the area around Agram (Zagreb) on August 20, 1943 (August 30, according to other sources). To be fair, a few Pz. IV and assault guns had arrived from Grafenwöhr according to some veterans of the battalion. The battalion’s personnel, about 800 men (includ-

A very short rest during Marsh on Caucasus in summer 1942

Wild with comrades depicted in this picture in Grafenwöhr during training in summer 1943

Men of SS-Pz.Abt. 11 with captured Italian tanks in Croatia

ing the staff, staff company, and 1-4 companies), were stationed in former factory buildings on the outskirts of Samobor in the mountains. Training continued, and defensive positions were constructed in preparation for partisan attacks.

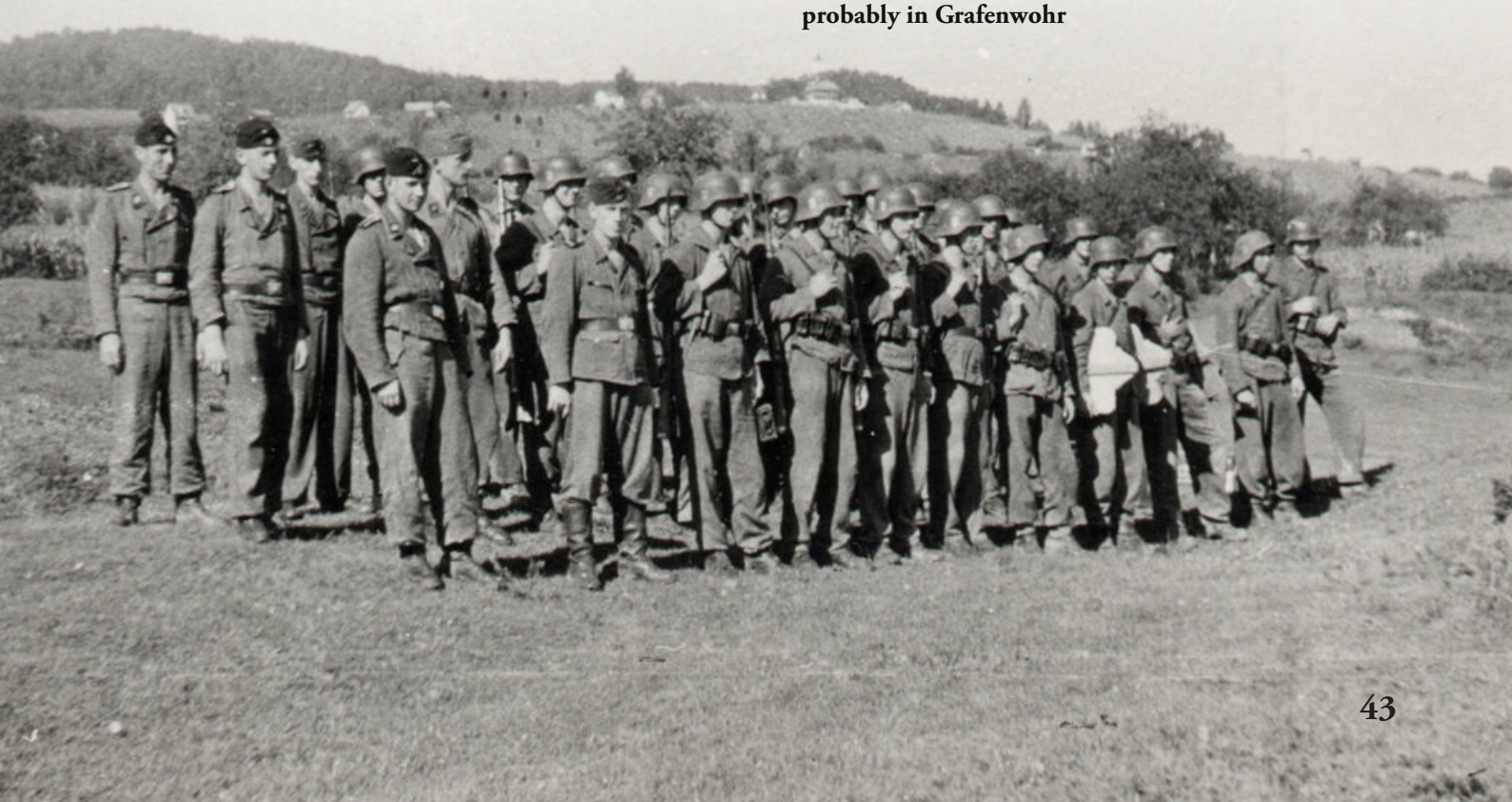
Due to Italy's capitulation to the Allies on September 8,1943, the battalion was placed on alert and sent to Karlovac to disarm Italian units, where they disarmed the Lombardy Armored Division. The SS tank crews, who still had no armored vehicles at that time, took up defensive positions facing south. A few days later, they began securing the Karlovac–Trieste road. It is worth noting that in Samobor, the SS-Pz.Abt.11 seized light Italian tanks of the L6/40 type (commonly referred to as "Badoglio coffins"). SS-Oscha. Max Stöckle who served in SS-Pz Abt. 11 commented "After the disarmament of the Italian troops in Croatia, we got light Italian tanks (without radio, signalling had to be done with flags) and Italian leather jackets"

Though of little combat value, these were repurposed as training vehicles for the tank crews of the "Nordland" Division. The battalion later took control of the Bosanski Novi – Glina – Sisak sector. At the same time on October 1, 1943, Wild was promoted to the rank of SS-Oberscharführer. We believe that Wild also received one of the tanks under his command, given his service record and the tank training we see in the photos. It is no coincidence that later he would be given command of one of the very few Panther tanks available in the Eastern front.

At the end of November 1943, "Nordland" began its transfer from Croatia to the so-called "Oranienbaum Pocket" near Leningrad, under the command of

Tank crewmen from the 1st Kp. during redeployment to the Leningrad area.

Tankers from 1Kp. posing in the field during trainings probably in Grafenwohr



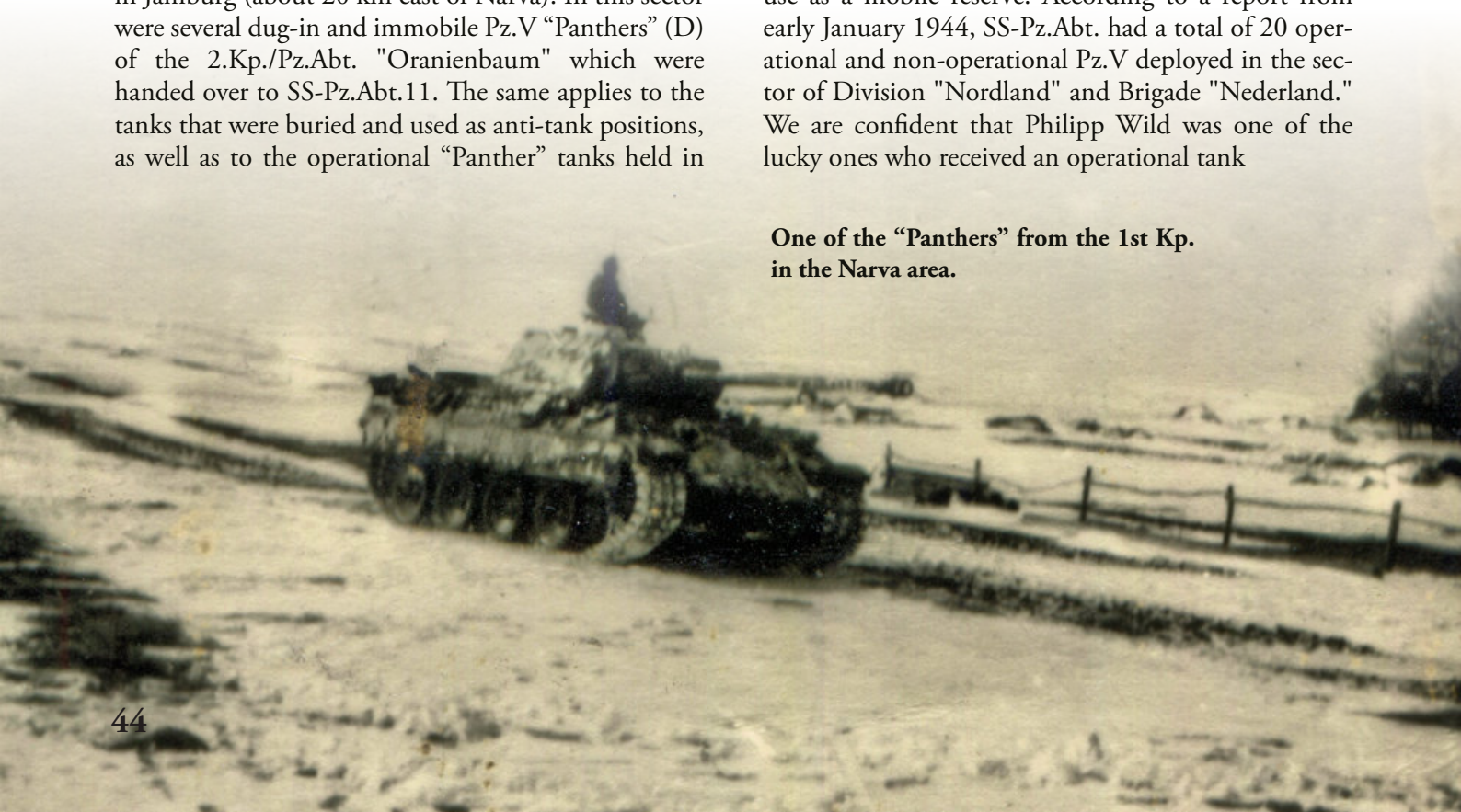
In the photo, we see a "Panther" from the 1st Kp. camouflaged, with crew members sitting on the gun barrel.

the III (Germanic) SS-Pz.Corps. Pz.Abt. initially remained in Croatia, awaiting delivery of assault guns or tanks. However, on December 14, the Corps Headquarters requested from 18th Army Command that the battalion be brought forward to join its division. The request was approved, and on 22 December, transport from Croatia began.

Around New Year 1943/44, the battalion arrived without tanks in Hungerburg and was then quartered in Jamburg (about 20 km east of Narva). In this sector were several dug-in and immobile Pz.V "Panthers" (D) of the 2.Kp./Pz.Abt. "Oranienbaum" which were handed over to SS-Pz.Abt.11. The same applies to the tanks that were buried and used as anti-tank positions, as well as to the operational "Panther" tanks held in reserve at Koporie. The transfer of the involved armored vehicles takes place in Sarinskaja. The company of SS-Pz.Abt.11, now re-equipped, is subordinated to the "Nederland" brigade. It is the 1. Kp of Pz.Abt where it served Wild (under SS-Ostuf. Paul Holtkamp).

While most of the "Panthers" were dug in as static positions along the front line, some were kept operational under difficult conditions by the repair staff for use as a mobile reserve. According to a report from early January 1944, SS-Pz.Abt. had a total of 20 operational and non-operational Pz.V deployed in the sector of Division "Nordland" and Brigade "Nederland." We are confident that Philipp Wild was one of the lucky ones who received an operational tank

One of the "Panthers" from the 1st Kp. in the Narva area.



Tankers from the 1st Kp. posing in great spirits against the backdrop of the Narva Fortress.

Max Stöckle stated: “In our front-line we found around 15 Pz. V, which were without motors and radios. We hungered for "real" tanks, and organized within a few days supply parts from Riga and other depots, thereby making around eight of these tanks serviceable, and under all circumstances at any time kept in use”

On January 14, 1944, the Soviet offensive began from the eastern part of the "Oranienbaum Pocket" in the sector of the 9th and 10th Luftwaffe Field Divisions. A day later, another Soviet push followed from the Leningrad area, aiming to link up with the forces advancing from the Pocket which they accomplished by January 19. The Soviets then continued their push west toward Narva with heavy use of artillery and tanks. The fixed-position “Panthers” of SS-Pz.Abt.11 were quickly overrun and had to be destroyed to prevent them from falling into enemy hands. On January 26 Wild was awarded Close Combat Clasp in Bronze (Nahkampfspange I. Stufe)

Max Stöckle stated:

“In the course of the major Soviet offensive through Ingria from January 14, some companies from the "Hermann von Salza" had to hand over their vehicles to other divisional units; hence their retreat from Jamburg back to Narva was immobile, hazardous and improvised to save the tank crews and the other battalion personnel. The battalion also brought back 6–8 of the repaired “Panthers” from Ingria to Narva. The first men of the Pz.Abt. killed in action were the commander of the 1 Kp., SS-Hstuf. Paul Holtkamp, who was killed on January 27, at Sarienkoja (Jamburg) by a direct hit during a reconnaissance mission” (Holtkamp was replaced by SS-Ustuf. Rudolf Rott who was Abt. Adjutant before).

On February 1st and 2nd, the formations of the SS-Pz.Corps poured into the Narva bridgehead. Tired and burnt out, the battered companies occupied the designated positions and clawed themselves firmly into the ground. The formations were a colorful mix of units. On February 12, the OKH ordered the disbandment of SS-Pz.Abt.11 and the transfer of its remaining 13 (according to another report, 14) “Panthers” to SS-Pz. Corps. Tanks were taken over by 1 Kp./SS-Pz.Abt.11 and used in the defense of Narva city. The other 3 companies of the battalion continued to serve in their previous sector near Hungerburg in infantry roles.

1 Kp., the only company of the battalion actually equipped with tanks. From the beginning, maintenance of the early model “Panther” Ausf. D proved problematic. The maintenance platoon had arrived from Croatia virtually without equipment or vehicles. The tank crews were not trained on the “Panther”, spare parts were extremely scarce and difficult to procure.

The 1.Kp. was subordinated to the 4. SS-Freiw.Pz. Gren.Brig. “Nederland” and, starting in February 1944, was deployed in the Narva bridgehead. SS-Brigade defended the bridgehead at Ivangorod, i.e., on the eastern side of the Narva River. Together with the assault guns of the s.SS-Pz.Jg.Abt. 54 and elements of the SS-Stug.Abt.11, “Panthers” formed the backbone of anti-tank defense in the bridgehead, which was initially heavily pressured by the Soviet forces. “

It was at this very moment that Philipp's finest hour arrived, as he commanded one of the operational “Pan-

The outcome of Wild's engagement: destroyed Soviet tanks near Narva, spring 1944.

thers" in this sector.

There, strong enemy air forces bombarded the bridgehead and the city of Narva during the nights of March 6–7 and March 7–8, 1944, with nonstop attacks lasting 10 and 11 hours respectively. The objective of the attack by the 30th Guards Rifle Corps was to roll up the entire German defense and continue westward in order to link up with Soviet forces attacking southwest of Narva. On the morning of March 8, at 07:00, a two-and-a-half-hour heavy artillery barrage began, followed by an assault by the Soviet 63rd Guards Rifle Division, supported by 14 tanks, focused on a narrow section of the northeastern sector of the bridgehead. Twelve enemy tanks broke through the main German line near Lilienbach in the northeast sector and advanced close to the heavy infantry weapons positions of the SS-Pz.Gr.Rgt 48 "General Seyffardt."

At this critical moment, SS-Oscha. Wild, with his "Panther" entered the battle and quickly destroyed all the breakthrough T-34 tanks. His decisive intervention prevented the Soviet troops from rolling up the Narva bridgehead as planned. The destruction of these tanks was crucial in halting the ongoing Soviet infantry attacks, which were supported by individual tanks.

From Wild's own words: "After the Soviets broke out of the Leningrad pocket, we retreated back to Narva. There, a small bridgehead was established. I was positioned with two "Panthers" on the bridgehead to support the infantry. The Narva was frozen, but part of our bridgehead was not.

On March 9, in the early morning, heavy drumfires began, indicating a major Soviet assault on the bridgehead. We received orders from the division headquarters to move out of cover and take up position to repel the Soviet attack. During this action, one of our tanks was hit directly by artillery. We lacked sufficient ammunition, but a resupply had just arrived. The drumfire had temporarily ceased, and I was fetching ammunition.

During this time, I observed tanks moving across the terrain about 600–800 meters away. At first, I thought they were friendly, but I quickly realized they

Commander of 1 Kp./SS-Pz.Abt. 11 SS-Ostuf. Rudolf Rott

Award ceremony for Philipp Wild. The award was personally presented to him by SS-Gruf. Matthias Kleinheisterkamp, the acting corps commander at the time. In the photo, Philipp is also congratulated by the battalion commander SS-Stubaf. Paul-Albert Kausch and the company commander SS-Ostuf. Rudolf Rott. Among the officers of the company, SS-Ustuf. Rudolf Chairselle is also visible.

were Soviet tanks.

I immediately ordered my crew to board and prepare for combat. T-34 tanks drove directly towards the river; our infantry pulled back. I was immediately ordered to push forward to the river and roll up the enemy forces along the riverbank from behind.

I instructed my fellow tank commander to move into position along the road leading to the river to immediately engage the Soviet tanks. To engage the enemy tanks (about 20–25) moving along the road, I myself attacked and opened fire on them immediately. I had no prior knowledge of Soviet tanks, but my well-trained crew was a great help.

My crew worked with great precision, and every range correction from me (distance and vulnerability of the enemy tanks) was quickly acted upon, ensuring every shot was a direct hit.

After some tanks were destroyed, the Russians recognized me as a threat and attempted to neutralize me in my position. It worked to my advantage that the Soviets were firing poorly and directing their fire poorly, so that I survived the battle unscathed.

When the Russians lost a large part of their tanks (T-34s and tanks with heavy howitzers), the rest fled. I pursued the retreating tanks and our infantry reoccupied the positions.

During the following night, the enemy attacked again with tanks. I received orders from divisional headquarters to counterattack the Soviet tanks again. I succeeded in destroying two tanks at very close range, which immediately caught fire and lit up the battlefield.

This situation lasted for two to three days, then the Russians gave up their attempts to attack our positions. I was then ordered to report to divisional headquarters, where the Generalfeldmarschall Model summoned me. He praised my brave and soldierly conduct. Model explained that by repelling the Russian attack, I had prevented the threat to the southerly fighting troops in the Pleskau area, something I had not even been consciously aware of. I had only fulfilled my duty as a soldier.

Shortly thereafter, the radio message came that I had been awarded the Knight's Cross. At this point, I would like to again thank my entire crew for their brave performance during the battles.

Submitted for the award of the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross by SS-Oberführer Wagner, the decoration was awarded to him on March 21, 1944. This recommendation was approved on March 23, 1944. Before he was awarded on March 9 with the Iron Cross I Class. Then he received Tank Assault Badge Silver (Panzer Kampfabzeichen silber) on March 26.

The feat of Wild was contested by the Higher SS and Police Leader in the occupied Netherlands, Johann Baptist Albin Rauter, in a letter addressed to the SS-Pz.Corps commander Felix Steiner. Rauter's complaint was based on an article by Dutch SS-PK Bob van Norden. The article described the actions of a Dutch volunteer, SS-Uscha. Frans Goedhart, who was gun commander in 4./SS-Pz.Gren.Rgt. 48 and who allegedly single-handedly destroyed 15 Soviet tanks during the same action. The correspondent claimed that Goedhart was unjustly awarded only the Iron Cross 1st Class, while all the glory, recognition, and higher decorations were taken by Wild.

We cannot say with certainty how well-founded this letter is, but it is possible that part of the tanks were indeed destroyed by that specific gun crew. In our opinion, it would be fair to credit the successful action to both Wild and Goedhart. According to another Dutch volunteer, Jan Munk, Frans Goedhart did indeed receive the German Cross in Gold, which he was wearing during their time at the SS-Junkerschule Bad Tölz. Unfortunately, we have no data to confirm the presence of the award, but if this is true, he fully deserved it.

According to the order issued by Army Group Command "Narwa" on May 27, all available tanks in the sector were to be consolidated into Pz.Kp. "Narwa" under the command of SS-Ustuf. Arthur Gratwohl and the outfitting of the company was to be completed by June 3. The company was placed under the direct command of Sturm-Rgt. "Narwa". Per the order, the unit was assigned 10 "Panther" tanks (though the document notes that 3 were in Riga and 2 were in the Reich for repairs) and 7 Pz.IVs from Beute-Pz.Kp. 285. Additionally, the order specified that 2 "Panthers" were to remain at the disposal of the SS-Brigade "Nederland" (we think that including Wild's Pz.V).

Another document regarding the "Narwa" Pz.Kp's formation shows that it was already ready by June 2, consisting of 4 combat-ready Pz. V, 1 Pz. V under repair, 1 short-barreled Pz.IV, 4 long-barreled Panzer IVs, and 4 SPWs. In addition to the aforementioned order, effective June 3, 1 short-barreled Pz. IV and 1 Pz. II were transferred from SS-Pz.Corps to Pz.-Kp. "Narwa", with their arrival to be reported to SS-Ustuf. Gratwohl.

We don't know for sure whether Wild was sent to this combat group or remained under the command of the SS-Brigade "Nederland", but according to the June 16th "Tagesmeldung" accepted that two Pz.V remained officially under the command of the "Nederland". Most likely it was Wild's tank among them.

This "mishmash" of mixed units didn't last long and soon by order from Armee-Abt. "Narwa" dated

Wild's Pz. Besatzung: Richtschütze (Gunner) Strm. Werner, Ladeschütze (Loader) Kauel, Fahrer (Driver) Uscha. Borowiak, Funker (radio operator) Walther and Wild (wearing his Knight Cross)

July 16, the unit previously known as "Pz.-Kompanie Narwa" was renamed, effective immediately, as the 1./SS-Pz. Abt. 11 "Hermann von Salza"

The Narva bridgehead was held until the end of July 1944 by the 4.SS-Pz. Gren. Brigade "Nederland" and subordinated units of the Division "Nordland." Fighting during this time was mainly limited to artillery duels and limited Soviet attacks. The 1.Kp suffered no tank losses during this period.

Adolf Hitler agreed on July 22, 1944 that the withdrawal from Narva to the "Tannenberg Line" (20 km to the west) could be carried out, after which the SS-Pz.Corps began implementing the retreat. The bridgehead at Ivangorod was evacuated during the night of July 24–25, after which the German units withdrew. By the morning of July 26, units of the SS-Pz.Corps had completed the evacuation. The main forces of the corps, including the SS-Pz.Abt 11. took part in the Battle of the Blue Hills (Sinimäed), where the Germans literally dug into their defenses while Soviet troops attempted to break through them on the move. We know that the 1 Kp. participated having 5 Pz.V and 7 Pz.IV (report from July 20). Unfortunately, we do not know the specific details of Wild and the 1 Kp. involvement, but given the intensity of the fighting that day, we believe they provided significant support in repelling the Soviet assault. Heavy fighting in this area continued on August 4-5, 1944 with severe losses on both sides and finished on August 10, when Soviet marshal Leonid Govorov who was commander in chief of the Leningrad front called off the offensive.

After August 5, 1944, fighting in the "Tannenberg Line" diminished. According to the order from the General Command of the III (germ.) SS-Pz. Corps dated August 13, the 1 Kp. was renamed the 4th Kp. and received armored vehicles from Army Group "Narwa", specifically: 7 "Panthers", 4 Pz.IVs, and 7 Assault Guns (Sturmgeschütze).

Due to the deteriorating situation on the southern flank of the 18th Army and the Soviet advance towards Dorpat (Tartu), threatening the rear of Armee-Abt. "Narwa", the "Tannenberg Line" had to be abandoned. On the night of September 18-19 1944, German forces began withdrawing toward Riga. The Germans subsequently withdrew to the bridgehead in Courland, where they dug in and became isolated.

From October 14, 1944 until January 28, 1945, the division held a front sector around Priekule. While the tankless parts of SS-Pz.Abt. 11, was withdrawn to Germany in November 1944 for refitting, the 1 Kp.remained with division. We do not know exactly when the 4 Kp. was redesignated back to the 1 Kp., but it is specifically the 1st Company that is mentioned as having remained in Courland while the rest of the battal-

Wild and his comrades posing during the defense of the "Tannenberg Line"

ion was evacuated.The company took over the rest of the panzers and Sturm artillery (according to the "Nordland"'s Kriegsgliederung dated Dec. 1, the company had 8 StuGs, 2 "Panthers", and 1 Bergepz. T34) and remained in the Courland pocket until January 1945. The majority of tankers served as infantry soldiers because they lacked vehicles. Most likely during that time, Wild lost his Pz.V, and he may have received a Stug III, as he is later mentioned as its commander.

From Rudolf Rott's Knight's Cross recommendation, we know that Wild participated in the same actions during the 4th Battle of the Courland Pocket as the commander of an assault gun: "On January 25, 1945, SS-Ostuf. Rott distinguished himself through personal bravery and daring independent decision-making. At roughly 0900 hours strong enemy forces coming from out of the area to the southwest of Purmsati were attacking in the direction of Stalgi. Rott had established a front of fire near Stalgi with one Pz V, 2 of our own and 3 Army assault guns. He was supporting the infantry's firefight. When the infantry had to yield to the opponent's massive attack, Rott gathered the retreating grenadiers and personally led them up to his assault guns into a new defensive line. Even though four of the assault guns were not operational any more, Rott left these guns remaining in the foremost line in order to provide the grenadiers with a morale boost."

In early February 1945, as part of the East Pomeranian Offensive, Soviet troops of the 1st Belorussian Front launched a powerful attack against the German Pomeranian grouping, Army Group "Vistula" (Heeresgruppe "Weichsel"). One of the striking episodes of this operation were the battles for Arnswalde - a small but heavily fortified town that the Germans had turned into a strongpoint where the remnants of III SS-Pz.Corps deployed. It was precisely here that Philipp Wild fought in his last battle.

On the night of February 5-6, 1945, the freshly arrived SS-Pz.Abt. 11 (who received new recruits and vehicles) took over security duties at Arnswalde. Initial engagements with advancing Soviet troops occurred here. In the following days, it successfully supported German counterattacks at Schönwerder and in the Reetz area. During these days, the battalion also reunited with the 1./SS-Pz.Abt. 11 that had been withdrawn from Courland, which at that time still possessed 8 StuGs, 1 "Panther" and 1 T34 (evacuated from pocket as well).

But on February 8, a crisis erupted south of Jacobshagen, where the Soviets had just crossed the Inha. SS-Ostubaf. Kausch saw the need to postpone the attack on Reetz in order to counter this new threat. He

therefore ordered SS-Ustuf. Kauerauf (from 503 s.SS-Pz.-Abt.) advanced with Ziegenhagen (Koziegłowy) and Klein-Silber, supported by 3 Sturmgeschütze from 1 Kp., under the command of SS-Oscha. Wild. It was a mission to keep the northern corridor open while reinforcing the defense of the city, where its five thousand inhabitants still remain, soon joined by another six thousand in the attacked area. Philipp Wild was severely wounded during the rescue action on February 9, near Ziegenhagen (Arnswalde) by a panzer grenade on the right side of the chest and upper arm. The next day his commander Rudolf Rott was killed in Klein-Silber, on February 10 and posthumously awarded the Knight's Cross.

Having been wounded, Wild was first sent to the Reserve Hospital Vechta/Oldenburg on February 17, and then evacuated to the Reserve Hospital Traunstein on April 17, 1945.

On May 4, 1945, he was taken as a prisoner by the Americans in Traunstein, where he was undergoing hospital treatment for a wound. After recovering from the wound, he was transferred to the prisoner-of-war camp in Cham, and subsequently to the prisoner-of-war camp in Regensburg. He remained under constant medical treatment for his wound. On June 30, 1946, he was released from the prisoner-of-war camp in Regensburg with the provision for subsequent further internment in the Darmstadt camp. The reason for his continued internment in Darmstadt was my membership in the Waffen-SS.

Thanks to Paul Turner, we were able to obtain and review some fascinating documents that include an excellent character reference for Wild during his time in captivity.

HQ of Civil Interment Camp 22 Regensburg gave him a description: "Hereby certified that P. Wild, 31G-6126095, was interned in this camp for a period of 14 months. When the camp was originally opened on August 1, 1945, Wild was selected from a large number of applicants as senior sergeant major of the camp, together with approximately 14,000 prisoners of war. He worked in cooperation with the American authorities and at the same time did his utmost to improve the living conditions of the prisoners of war. It is mainly thanks to his efforts that the extensive sports program, legal advice, vocational training work, as well as the camp theater, are so well organized and functioning. He supported the German camp leader in the

Wild posing during treatment in the hospital. On the wall, we can see his Knight's Cross.

Wild is depicted in a photo with his colleagues from the factory in the post-war period.

organization of the camp administration. His work, his character, and his activities were at all times beyond any praise"

On August 29, 1947, he was released from the internment camp in Darmstadt after the denazification court proceedings had been completed and he had been classified in the group of the less incriminated. He has no further statements to make.

Executive Officer Major Whiting who was Commander of the Camp stated : "During his time in the camp, he was employed as the first assistant to the head of the camp administration. He performed his work well and thereby rendered valuable services to both the German and the American commanders of the camp. While in the Camp he was employed as 1st clerk at the German chief of the Camp Government. He demonstrated that he was a very intelligent, diligent and careful clerk. Please assist him in every possible way"

After his release, Philipp dedicated himself to what he loved most, namely technology. Drawing on his experience working with machinery, he managed to get a job at the "Opel" factory, where he worked for many years as a foreman. Wild lived a modest and quiet life with his family in his hometown, where he eventually passed away on July 29, 1999.

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Special thanks: to Paul Turner, Marc Rickmenspoel, Michael Wood, Charles Trang, Predrag Blanusa, Lennart Westberg, Georg Schwab and Petter Kjellander for their support

Andrii Zubkov

Fritz Part 2 Freitag

A Knights Cross for Cowardice

In July 1944 the understrength Galician Division commanded by *SS-Brigadeführer* Freitag and comprised of western Ukrainians with senior German commanders made its combat debut on the Eastern Front in the Brody sector as part of XIII. Army Corps. The first element was committed on 15 July against a Soviet attack which quickly devastated all German units in the area and trapped XIII.A.K. in the 'Brody Pocket'. Facing massively unequal odds and beset by severe communications problems, on 19 July with most of the senior German commanders having already abandoned their units, some elements began to show signs of collapse. Freitag panicked, lost his nerve and abruptly resigned his command. The Division was then subordinated to *Generalmajor* Gerhard Lindemann, who successfully brought it under control and restored the front. Freitag subsequently escaped from the pocket however unlike the other divisional commanders not leading a battlegroup, but as witnessed by SS-Freiw.-Sturmmann Mychailo Kormylo, crawling on his stomach alone accompanied only by his driver.

In August 1944, Himmler having taken the decision to rebuild the Galician Division for 'political considerations', summoned Freitag for a conference to discuss the matter whereupon Freitag claimed the Ukrainians had failed him and recommended the Division be dissolved and that he be appointed as commander of a German formation. Himmler dismissed his objections and once again much to his displeasure, appointed him as commander based on his previous experience with the Ukrainians. To mollify him Himmler awarded him the Knights Cross. To this end it appears that the commander of the 3rd Panzer Army *Generaloberst* Raus was solicited in order to provide the recommendation. Evidence for this can be found in the short introductory note in which Raus seeks to exonerate himself for having had any part in it, stating that 'In view of the short period during which the [14 Galician] Division] was part of the 1st Panzer Army, it is not possible for me to make a definite and exhaustive assessment'. Moreover it repeats the contents of Freitag's earlier rabid report submitted in the immediate aftermath of the battle.

Awarding of the Knights Cross of the Iron Cross

Award date 30.9.44
Der Oberbefehlshaber der 3. Panzerarmee
A.H.Qu., 23.8.1944

Review concerning
SS-Brigadeführer F r e i t a g
Kdr. 14. Waffen-Gren.-Div. der SS (galiz.Nr.1)

In view of the short period during which the [14 Galician Division] was part of the 1. Panzer Army, it is not possible for me to make a definite and exhaustive assessment. Impression: Circumspect, self-assured, leader. Great personal bravery, eager for action. He made enthusiastic efforts to get the best out of his Galician SS-Division. He distinguished himself while breaking through the surrounding forces at Zolochiv, by virtue of his leading, dynamic approach and tough action against weaklings.
Raus Generaloberst

SS-Brigadeführer Freitag demonstrated exemplary and total personal commitment in leading his division under uniquely difficult combat conditions in the Brody pocket.

His Division in this instance was not made up of German soldiers prepared to fight to the last in combat, but of Ukrainians of the Galician region, innately weak and apt to waver, and lacking all the manly and fighting German virtues.

The cohesion and leadership of such men, unaccustomed to war and lacking toughness, in the execution of the most difficult of orders – combat in the Brody pocket – demanded the highest and unique commitment of the responsible leader.

Due to the prevailing conditions, from 12.7.44 onwards, the Division was placed at the decisive point of the battle in the pocket and received as its first combat-impression the retreat of German units.

When the reinforced Gren. Rgt. 30 threatened to be drawn into this retreat, it was the Division commander who with the regiment commander immediately stabilised the situation in that area and prevented the impending breakthrough.

In the further course of the battle when numerous volunteers of the Division fled due to innate cowardice and in some cases even turned their weapons on their own officers and NCOs , it was again to a decisive extent the Division commander who restored the situation on the spot with ruthless personal intervention and took the appropriate brutal measures against those wretches.

The Division fulfilled its orders, under the most difficult circumstances, up to the 19.7.44. This was achieved with Ukrainians, [underlining in original] who, with few exceptions, are not inherently disposed as fighters, supported only by a handful of German personnel.

The recognised achievements of the Division when deployed in the crucial point of the battle, was solely due to the German leadership and ultimately to the Division commander. It was largely due to their final deployment of [German] personnel at the focal point of the battle.

The tragedy of the Division's deployment is that despite the exemplary conduct of the Division commander, it was denied decisive combat success.

After the Division was crushed in the Brody pocket, the Division commander made himself available to the leader of the rear guard troops - Generalmajor Lindemann - and after his heroic death, despite being wounded himself, he was the last general to leave the pocket cautiously and safely leading all remaining troops out of the first encirclement ring.

In the late afternoon of the 22.7.44 the Division commander gathered about 4,000 men of all divisions of the XIII.A.K. and on his own initiative broke through the encirclement ring, which had been renewed by the enemy, to the south-west.

In contrast to other battle groups that attempted to breakout towards the west and the south and in the main fell victim to the enemy at Zaskow and Peremyshliany, he led his battlegroup out of the renewed encirclement despite the exhaustion of his men.

SS-Brigadeführer Freitag has been deployed at the front since the start of this war, and since the end of 1941 he has been almost continuously deployed in the

east (Eastern Front). He has fought in the mid-sector of the Eastern Front, as a regimental commander at Wolchow and outside Leningrad and has proved himself as a troop leader.'

The citation endorsed by Raus was grossly disingenuous to say the least. No mention was made of the fact that Freitag resigned his command at the critical point of the battle, neither was any indication given of any of the sources upon which the supporting proposal was based.

Unsurprisingly not a single name of any witnesses to his alleged 'heroism' is given and he certainly did not 'gather 4,000 men about him' and lead them out of the pocket as there is no record to be found of any single group remotely near this size successfully breaking out. Had he even lead 100 men, finding many witnesses to substantiate the claim would have been a very easy thing to do. In fact in the numerous post-action reports filed by various participants of varying ranks, the names of all the divisional commanders are mentioned as actively participating in leading groups during the breakout, with one notable exception – Freitag. His name features only once in any of the reports thus far discovered - in this case that of SS-Oberscharführer Mekat the commander of the Galician Division's Kriegsberichter platoon who himself suggested Freitag demonstrated cowardice. He wrote; '[…] The next day I came across the divisional doctor, an Obersturmbannführer [SS-Obstuf. Dr. Max Specht] with his medical team. He told me in answer to my question [about the whereabouts of the Divisional Commander]: 'The Division commander has probably escaped from the pocket with the [Fieseler] Storch (light aircraft).' Although this popular rumour about his absconding by plane which spread during the battle was untrue, it is indicative of the general assumption by his own German command staff that he had abandoned his division and sought to save himself, which is exactly what he did, together with his driver.

The 'recognised achievements of the Galician Division when deployed in the crucial point of the battle' should rightly have been credited to Generalmajor Lindemann who alone was responsible for them, but had unfortunately been captured and could not therefore provide a dissenting voice. The award instead was made to Fritz Freitag, who in an act of cowardice had abandoned his Division and sought to save himself.

Michael James Melnyk

SS on Trial PART II

Central Office of the State Justice Administrations

A long-forgotten complex was the Third Reich's discrimination and later mass murder of primarily German and European Roma. The fact that the Allied trials in Nuremberg excluded these crimes was probably due to the fact that the previous "selection" of Roma and their deportation in March 1943 to Auschwitz was not carried out by the Gestapo but by the Kripo, the German criminal police, where the deportations and murders of Roma were camouflaged as a "police matter".

After partly animated debates in the Bundestag in the 1960s, the statute of limitations for murder was suspended and completely abolished in 1979. However, the statute of limitations had already been set in 1960 for murders committed before 8 May 1945. The majority of the suspected perpetrators of the Holocaust can be divided into two groups. One consists of the often senior officials in the RSHA who formulated (Befehlsgeber) or at the same level communicated (Befehlsmittler) the deportation decisions to the extermination camps. The other group was the “near-death” perpetrators (tatnahe Täter): SS men or police officers in the execution squads; the personnel of the extermination camps or the drivers of the mobile gas vans.

These two groups would, through unfortunate circumstances, receive entirely different assessments from the West German legal system. A seemingly discreet legislative amendment in 1968 to West German criminal law had unforeseen and catastrophic effects, particularly for the preliminary investigations and prosecutions against the so-called "desk murderers" at the RSHA in Berlin. In brief, the legal amendment meant that in every individual prosecution for murder against a potentate who had signed deportation orders to an extermination camp, the prosecutor had to concretely prove that the suspect had been driven by "base motives" (niedrige Beweggründe). To be judged as murder, the motive for the act had to be associated with pleasure (lust for murder), with racist motives (antisemitism), that the victims were sexually exploited, or had been forced to witness people being liquidated before them in the queue for the mass grave or gas chamber. If, on the other hand, the killing had occurred for "political-ideological" reasons or alternatively on orders without gain for the perpetrator, the act had to be judged as manslaughter, which in West Germany had become statute-barred in May 1960.

Following a precedent-setting ruling in 1969 by the Supreme Court (Bundesgerichtshof) in Karlsruhe based on the current legislative amendment, the senior

public prosecutor's office at the Kammergericht in West Berlin practically overnight had to drop several hundred, for several years well-prepared, preliminary investigations against a large number of high-ranking suspected perpetrators in the RSHA and various Reich ministries.

The attention of the police and prosecutors was thereafter directed to a significant degree toward the underclass of the Holocaust: the guard personnel in the concentration and extermination camps who had carried out mass murder through small arms, beating to death, or gas, alternatively nurses who murdered by means of toxic injections within "Aktion T4."

Senior Prosecutor Heinz Artzt at the Central Office (Zentrale Stelle) has examined the fundamental difference between traditional war crimes and the mass murders within the Holocaust. During many trials, the defense attempted to characterize several mass murders committed in close connection with events at the front as legal reprisal or anti-partisan actions according to international law. Prosecutors and courts have consistently revealed the hollowness of these arguments and clarified the special National Socialist character of these extermination actions of a genocidal nature, which were otherwise completely independent of the regular combat events at the front.

Lawyers representing former SS and policemen who were part of the execution squads in the East have often claimed immunity for their clients in court by asserting that they had been forced to participate in the mass murders under the risk of otherwise being executed themselves or severely punished for refusal to follow orders (so-called Befehlsnotstand). However, not a single such case from the years 1939–1945 has been substantiated in court. On the contrary, there are several cases where, among others, policemen individually or in groups refused to participate in the executions of Jews in the East without suffering any reprisals of a serious nature. Chief Senior Prosecutor Dr. Rückerl refers to the case where a German police major, before SS General Friedrich Jeckeln in Ukraine in 1942, successfully refused to allow his police battalion to participate in a mass execution of Soviet Jews with the explanation that his battalion was trained for combat at the front and not for murdering civilian Jewish men, women, and children.

The potential witnesses to the Holocaust constituted a multifaceted problem before and during relevant preliminary investigations and trials. Among the surviving victims from the concentration and extermination camps, it turned out, simply described, that their senses focused only on details immediately con-

SS-Obergruppenführer Dr. Werner Best. Never brought to trial for mass murder in Poland.

SS-Standartenführer Walter Rauff, responsible for the development of mobile gas vans. Never extradited from Chile.

nected to their own survival. All other observations, such as the circumstances surrounding mass executions of fellow prisoners and their executioners, they simply did not have the strength to register. One such witness described the problem in the 1960s in a letter to the public prosecutor's office in Kiel in the following way:

"It is demanded of us that we should have seen and heard everything. In reality, as camp internees, we were paralyzed by fear. It is required of us that we should be able to state specific dates and times, but in the camp we owned no watches or calendars. We are also expected to be able to describe the appearance of various executioners in the camps. But in their uniforms, they looked identical to us. And when it turns out that we [in interrogations or during the trial], after more than twenty years, are mistaken about a single detail, our credibility as witnesses is called into question entirely."

In German prosecutor contacts with potential witnesses living in New York (where the majority of Jewish witnesses resided, besides emigration to Israel), it emerged that only fifty percent of these witnesses were willing to provide information. To the extent that reasons for this hesitation were given, it was stated that a confrontation with details from their horrific time in the death camps would tear open partially healed spiritual wounds, or alternatively that the witnesses had repressed all memories. Another category of witnesses who refused to participate consists of the internees who, due to alleged criminality or homosexuality, had been sent to concentration camps and did not wish to reveal this to relatives and the media during a main hearing.

A special group of cases constitutes the Third Reich's bloody finale in 1945 when the Gestapo made tabula rasa by shooting thousands of political prisoners in various prisons during the final months of the war. At the same time, in January 1945, the SS hastily evacuated the prisoners in the large concentration camps in the East, such as Auschwitz, Gross-Rosen, and Stutthof. A common sight therefore became tens of thousands of concentration camp prisoners who, as walking skeletons and driven by the SS, stumbled along highways and through villages westward. In January 1945, there were more than 714,000 concentration camp prisoners of various nationalities, of whom at least 250,000 were shot or died of exhaustion during the death marches. During trials concerning these mass murders, it emerged that during the administrative chaos of the final weeks of the war, no central directives from Berlin existed; instead, whether prisoners were shot or allowed to live depended on the composition and caprice of the guard personnel. Many massacres occurred through decisions "from below," whereby the perpetrators were a mixture of older SA men, 15-year-old Hitler Youth, police, soldiers from the Wehrmacht, Volksturm men, as well as ordinary civilians. Historian Volker Ullrich has commented on this phenomenon: "A striking piece of evidence of the extent to which the virus of unbridled violence had taken possession of parts of German society."

Federal German police and prosecutors have, between 1949 and 2019, initiated preliminary investigations against 106,665 named suspects for NS-crimes. Of these, 6,522 individuals have been the subject of a final judgment in the form of varying sentences. For just over 100,000 people, the matter thus ended without a judgment. Many of these, however, turned out to have been dead before the investigation began; either as fallen in the war or deceased in prisoner-of-war captivity. Many had committed suicide, had never been found (missing in the war), obtained forged identities, or fled abroad. Many investigations, indictments, and trials have been dismissed due to health reasons or the high age of the suspects. The number of preliminary examinations (Vorermittlungen) in Ludwigsburg has been noticeably reduced in recent times due to the increasing age of the suspects. By far the most intense years for the Central Office were the period from 1967 to 1971 when more than 600 preliminary examinations were processed at any given time. The staff strength in Ludwigsburg then reached its peak with a total of 121 people (including administrative staff), among them 49 prosecutors, criminal police officers, and judges. Since 2015, about fifteen preliminary examinations have been initiated annually at the Central Office, mainly against personnel at various concentration and extermination camps.

The current head of the agency for the Central Office, Senior Prosecutor (Oberstaatsanwalt) Thomas Will, has pointed out to the author of this article the following important paradigm shift in the adjudication of NS-crimes. In July 2015, the District Court (Landgericht) of Lüneburg sentenced the former camp guard at KZ Auschwitz Oskar Gröning to four years in prison for aiding and abetting (Mithilfe) murder. Notwithstanding that Gröning himself had not physically (as a perpetrator/Täter) murdered any camp prisoner by, for example, small arms or gas, the court (as well as superior instances) judged that Oskar Gröning, through his general guard function (allgemeine Dienstausübung) as an indispensable cog within the camp hierarchy's strict machinery of death, fulfilled the requirements for responsibility for aiding and abetting murder. Following the relevant precedent-setting rul-

Chief Prosecutor Thomas Will, current head of the Zentrale Stelle.

ing by the Supreme Court in September 2016, a further handful of former camp guards in KZ Sachsenhausen and Auschwitz have been sentenced on identical grounds.

At present, similar indictments have been brought at the District Courts of Berlin and Hanau. At the public prosecutor's office in Neuruppin, a similar preliminary investigation regarding KZ Ravensbrück is currently being conducted. An interesting case is the 2022 judgment at a court in Itzehoe for aiding and abetting murder in 1943–45 in 10,505 cases against a female former civilian secretary at the camp staff in KZ Stutthof. The defendant appealed the judgment to the Supreme Court (BGH). Since the woman's administrative function was judged to be somewhat more distant from the machinery of death than, for example, a camp guard's, the Federal Prosecutor General (Generalbundesanwalt) also requested a so-called Revision in the case. At the main hearing on August 20, 2024, at the Supreme Court (BGH) in Leipzig, the BGH upheld the judgment against the woman. As the camp staff's only secretary and stenographer—through whom all the SS commandant's liquidation and deportation orders were conveyed—the defendant was considered to have constituted an indispensable part of "central importance" in the chain of command (Befehlskette) at KZ Stutthof during the years 1943–45.

On January 1, 2021, the archive at the Central Office contained 1,780,000 index cards of person, place, and unit names, as well as approximately 560,000 documents; mainly photocopies of original documents from German and foreign archives. Since the year 2000, the Federal Archives (Bundesarchiv) has had the ongoing responsibility for final archiving and provision for research of files from this enormous archive. The University of Stuttgart has established a research department in the field, and the intention is, after the regular activities at the Central Office have definitely concluded, to establish a combined museum with research and a place of remembrance on the site: Erinnerungsstätte.

According to Senior Prosecutor Thomas Will, "all suspects of NS-crimes, as far as they are capable of being interrogated and participating in a court hearing, will be held accountable for their actions during their lifetime." Thomas Will emphasizes in conclusion:

"For the survivors of the Holocaust and their relatives, it is of the utmost importance, as it is a reminder for future generations, that these mass murders are thoroughly investigated to the very end. This also characterizes our state governed by the rule of law."

Lennart Westberg

Member of the Swedish Military History Commission. The original of the article "SS on Trial" was published in the Swedish Journal of Law (*Svensk Juristtidning*) 2024:11.

SS-Pz.Aufkl.Abt.2 "Das Reich"

SS-Pz.A.A.2 is a unit that has long intrigued historians. Originally established as the Aufklärungsabteilung (Reconnaissance Detachment) of the SS-VT, it was formed during the summer of 1939 from various Spähkompanien (Scout Companies) within the SS-Standarten "Deutschland," "Germania," and "Nürnberg," later also including "Der Führer." The unit participated in the 1939 invasion of Poland, having been transported from Germany to East Prussia before entering Poland from its northern borders. During the Western Campaign in the spring and summer of 1940, SS-A.A.2 achieved fame by being the first unit to reach the Spanish border—an achievement that the propaganda machinery exploited to the fullest. In connection with this, SS-Obersturmführer Fritz Vogt was awarded the Knight's Cross, becoming the first junior officer to receive this high decoration. The presentation was conducted by the commander of the SS-V Division, SS-Gruppenführer Paul Hausser.

SS-A.A.2 continued its service in the Balkans, with parts of the unit participating in the capture of Bucharest. Following this, SS-A.A.2 was involved in the brutal fighting in the Soviet Union, taking part in all the major battles where the SS-Division "Das Reich" was engaged, including Kharkov and Kursk. The later 2.SS-Pz.Div. "Das Reich" became one of the most successful units in the German armed forces; within the Waffen-SS, no other unit received more Knight's Crosses or German Crosses in Gold than "Das Reich."

Prior to the Allied landings in Normandy, "Das Reich" was stationed in southern France. It was there that an event occurred that would forever darken the legacy of SS-Pz.A.A.2. In the small French village of Tulle, the French Resistance attacked the German command post. A number of German soldiers and police were killed in the skirmish, while others were taken prisoner. As a result, SS-Pz.A.A.2 and its 4th Company were ordered to enter Tulle and suppress all resistance, which they did. However, in the aftermath, an officer from the SD

SS-Gruf. Paul Hausser decorates SS-Ostuf. Fritz Vogt with the Knight's Cross, making him the first junior officer to receive this high decoration.

(Sicherheitsdienst) arrived and demanded that the people of Tulle pay for their "crime." He ordered all the male villagers to stand in a long line, which he then inspected. According to veterans of SS-Pz.A.A.2, the deciding factor was whether a villager had muddy shoes; the SD officer reasoned that a town dweller should not have muddy shoes, and therefore, anyone who did must be part of the French Resistance.

A total of 128 people were selected and ordered to be hanged from the lampposts lining the streets of Tulle. This task was carried out by the Pionier-Zug (Pioneer Platoon) of the 4th Company, SS-Pz.A.A.2. The man who managed the actual hangings was the later SS-Hauptscharführer Otto Hoff, assisted by Elimar Schneider from Strasbourg. After 99 people had been hanged, they ran out of rope, and the SD officer called off the operation and left the village. For SS-Pz.A.A.2, the journey continued toward Normandy to face the Allied forces. After the war, Otto Hoff was sentenced to three years in prison in Bordeaux and was released in the early 1950s.

The fighting in Normandy proved exceptionally fierce for SS-Pz.A.A.2, with no quarter given on either side.

Eventually, as is well known, they were forced to retreat, and the 2.SS-Pz.Div. "Das Reich" was moved once more to face the soldiers of the Red Army. In the context of the recently concluded battles for Budapest, we now introduce the account of Hans Peter Kirste, the future company commander of 2./SS-Pz. A.A.2. As his narrative spans many pages, it will be published as a serial in Eiserne Kreuz.

SS-Ostuf. Ignatz Auer, Kp.Fhr 3./SS-Pz.Aufkl.Abt.2

- After the fighting in the Ardennes, I was still part of the divisional leader reserve and received instructions to remain in the Koblenz area to await further orders. I found excellent quarters at the home of a master tailor in Engers. Prepared to recover from the hardships of war, I spent several pleasant days with the tailor's hospitable family, which was made even more enjoyable by the company of a beautiful nurse who lived in the same house; we went on many wonderful sleigh rides together.

This pleasant interlude came to an end when orders reached me to take command of the 2nd Company of Panzer-Aufklärungs-Abteilung 2. My home remained my unit, which I had belonged to since May 1942. In late January and early February 1945, the guessing games regarding the division's new area of operation had begun. It was presumed that the division would be deployed to the Oder Front or the Berlin area.

When the rail transports began on February 8th, no one had any idea where the journey was headed. Even the train crew only knew the destination as far as the next relief station. The transports rolled through Würzburg, Munich, and Salzburg. As the journey continued toward Vienna, it became clear that the Hungarian theater of war was the only possible destination. Since the reconnaissance detachment was already on rail transport, I was sent after them.

Our detachment took cover in the Mihályi area; the 2nd Company was—if I remember correctly—positioned quite far northwest of this location in a village north of the Ödenburg (Sopron) – Kapuvár road, in a beautiful, typically Hungarian village. There, I found the company and took command. From the personnel list, I still remember that Untersturmführer

SS-Ustuf. Alfred Siegling

Eberhardt Bessmann was the leader of the 1st Platoon, Oberscharführer Friedl Buchwald led the 2nd Platoon, Walter Becker was the Spiess (First Sergeant), and Hermann Schank was the Schirrmeister (Equipment Manager).

Organization and Camouflage

The company was equipped with armored personnel carriers (Schützenpanzern). During the subsequent difficult battles, remnants from the 3rd Company (AA), remnants from the divisional storm company, and scattered Wehrmacht soldiers were incorporated into the company. These Wehrmacht soldiers had volunteered to join us and were under the leadership of an energetic Panzer lieutenant; these men fought selflessly shoulder to shoulder with us. During the battles on March 28th, the 2nd Company lost its 1st Platoon almost entirely—only three men survived. Together with the men who had joined the 2nd Company, the unit formed the core of the detachment for infantry operations. The 3rd Company, which also remained, consisted mostly of barely trained replacement personnel.

In our billeting area, a heavenly peace prevailed, which the men had well earned after the exertions of the Ardennes offensive. The relationship with the population was relaxed—one could even say partially friendly. The time was used intensively for training and the repair of weapons, vehicles, equipment, and clothing. For me, it was a matter of familiarizing myself with the men of the company.

Strict camouflage measures were ordered: aerial camouflage for all vehicles, vehicle traffic only at night, and messenger traffic during the day only by foot or bicycle. All tactical markings on the unit were to be removed. Gradually, word leaked out that the 6th SS Panzer Army was assembling in Hungary—a sign that a major operation was imminent. The 6th Panzer Army, under Colonel General Sepp Dietrich, included:

I. SS-Pz.Korps with the 1st SS-Pz.-Division "Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler" and the 12th SS-Pz.-Division "Hitlerjugend".

II. SS-Pz.Korps with the 2nd SS-Pz.-Division "Das Reich" and the 9th SS-Pz.-Division "Hohenstaufen".

A cavalry corps.

44th Gren.Division "Hoch- und Deutschmeister" as well as

III. Pz.-Korps with the 1st and 3rd Pz.Div. Additionally, army and corps troops were included.

SS-Stubaf. Ernst August Krag, Abt.Kdr. SS-Pz.Aufkl.Abt.2

Strategic Planning

On the Hungarian front, Budapest had fallen on February 12, 1945; the garrison had perished fighting, much like in Stalingrad, and relief attempts remained unsuccessful. During the collapse, the 8th SS Cavalry Division "Florian Geyer", the 22nd SS Volunteer Cavalry Division (Hungarian No. 1), and the 13th Pz.Div. were destroyed. Facing the German Army Group South were three Russian shock armies. The operational plan gave the 6th SS Panzer Army the task, as the main effort, to advance with a strong left wing on both sides of the Sarviz Canal all the way to the Danube, to cut off the enemy's rear communications and form bridgeheads over the Danube. The II. SS-Pz. -Korps was deployed east of the Sarviz Canal, and our division on the right wing with contact toward the canal. The start of the attack was ordered for March 6.

The days of recovery and peace were thus over for us in early March. Alarm! On March 3, we rolled out. Fresh snow and partially mud-clogged roads hindered the march. Due to the extremely poor road conditions, the division could only begin the attack on March 7 with parts of the force, from the Stuhlweissenburg area

between Lake Balaton and Lake Velence. The direction of the thrust was Aba – Heinrich Major – Sarkeresztur. The latter location became a stubbornly defended cornerstone of the Russian front. While the German attack east of the Sarviz Canal stalled in front of Sarkeresztur, the Leibstandarte succeeded in advancing west of and along the canal to a depth of about 25 to 30 km. This created a long open flank toward the canal for that division. Our detachment was thereafter...

The Detachment's Command and Losses

...withdrawn from the division's sector and deployed west of the Sarviz Canal in the LAH sector. The detachment's command post was established at the northern edge of Kaloz. Here, the leaders of the 2nd and 3rd Companies, Kirste and Auer, received their mission orders. For me, this was the first mission order as a company commander.

Even though it doesn't quite fit in here, I still want to include some names from the detachment's personnel list:

Commander: SS-Stubaf. Krag.
Adjutant: SS-Ostuf. Gerhard Bülte.
Ordnance Officer: SS-Ustuf. Kern, wounded in Hungary, missing during transport back to Austria.

Commander 1.Kp: SS-Hstuf Otto Resch.
Commander 2.Kp: SS-Ostuf. Hans P. Kirste.
Commander 3.Kp: SS-Ostuf Ignatz Auer, killed in action in the Raab area during a briefing at the detachment command post by a hit from a "Stalin Organ" (Katyusha rocket).

Commander 4.Kp: SS-Ostuf Franz Buchmann.
Commander 5.Kp (Heavy): SS-Ostuf Karl Wagner.

Infantry Gun Platoon: SS-Oscha Karl Hett.
Anti-tank Gun Platoon (7.5 cm): SS-Oscha Herbert Behrens, killed in action on May 14 in Bisamberg by submachine gun fire.

Pak Platoon: SS-Oscha Martin Debus, killed in action around April 12 or 13, 1945, on the road between Vienna and Wolkersdorf by a tank shell, standing directly next to me.

Back to the first mission order: The detachment's task was to cross the Sarviz Canal and form a bridgehead on the eastern side of the canal as a jumping-off point for a further attack into the left flank of the Russians defending northward at Sarkeresztur, whom our division faced. Company Auer received...

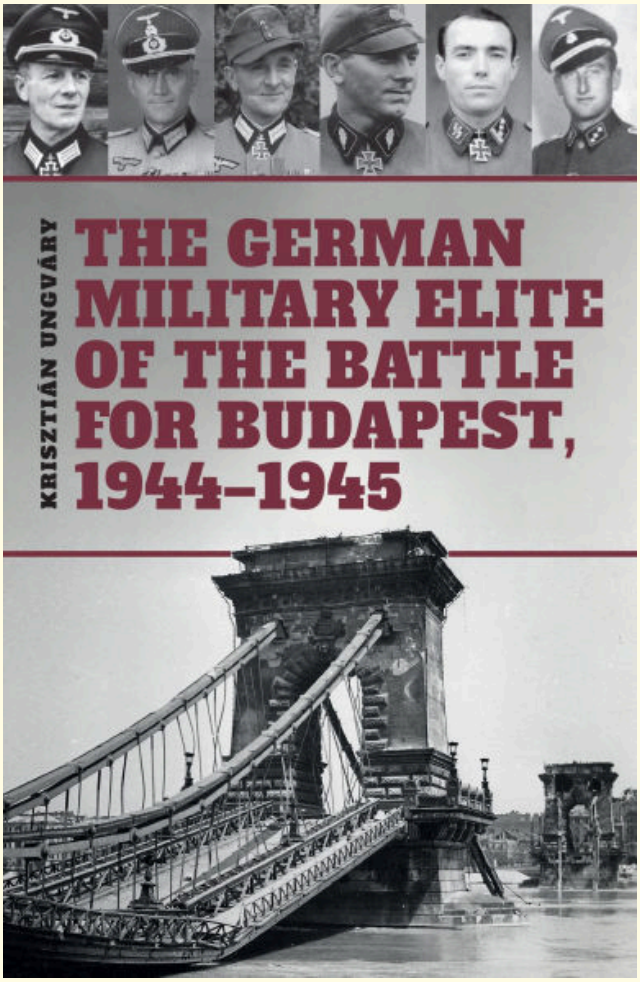
The Attack at Kaloz

...orders to attack from the northern edge of Kaloz along the road leading toward Sarkeresztur, cross the canal, and form a bridgehead. Company Kirste had the mission to attack eastward from the southern part of Kaloz, cross the canal, and likewise form a bridgehead. The distance between the 3rd and 2nd Company attacks was approximately 2 kilometers. No heavy weapons were available for the attack, and it was unknown whether the canal was occupied by the enemy or not.

The 2nd Company advanced mounted to the assembly area in the southern part of Kaloz and deployed from there for the attack, with Platoon Buchwald on the right wing and the company commander in the center of the company in the front line. At the edge of Kaloz, we saw before us an open plain of nearly 1,000 meters, bounded to the east by the canal's embankment, which was clearly visible. A bridge leading over the canal was also clearly discernible, at least from the center of the attacking company.

About 300 meters before the canal lay a small, rectangularly arranged farmstead. The company, grouped in depth and breadth, first reached the farm without enemy interference. Suddenly, infantry fire struck the company from the opposite bank of the canal; mortar fire also commenced. The farm provided initial cover for parts of the company. Now it was a matter of crossing the ground to the canal embankment to reach the attack objective and find cover behind the levee. The advance succeeded under the protection of the firing wing and with mortar support. The enemy on the opposite bank withdrew; the canal could be crossed via the bridge and the enemy position occupied. Meanwhile, Platoon Buchwald had managed to reach the canal on the right wing, even though they had been met with fire. They succeeded in crossing the canal...

Georg Schwab



The German Military Elite of the Battle for Budapest, 1944-1945 by Krisztián Ungváry (Keszthely, Hungary: PeKo Publishing, 2025), 384 pages ISBN 978-615-5583-93-3.

Rating: Five EK I of Five possible

Although the battle of Budapest was the final cataclysmic event in Eastern Europe at the war's end, its significance and aftereffects to this day are little known outside of Hungary. For a variety of reasons, including slanted postwar histories written by the Soviet and Hungarian communist regimes as well as the tendency in the West to focus on its own wartime historical narratives, the tenacity and heroism of the city's defenders have been deliberately covered up or misrepresented until the end of the Cold War. To correct the record and fill in the gaps of memory, Hungarian historian Krisztián Ungváry has taken up the task.

The siege of Budapest, lasting nearly 50 days from 26 December 1944 until 13 February 1945, was preceded by the USSR's invasion of Hungary beginning on 16 September 1944. On that date, Marshal Malinovsky's 2nd Ukrainian Front burst forth towards the strategic objective of Budapest from the foothills of the Transylvanian Alps. After 6 weeks of hard-fought battles on the Hungarian plains including the tank battle of Debrecen, by 28 October Malinovsky's troops had pushed the German and Hungarian forces of General Fretter-Pico's 6th Army back to the Tisza River. The battle for Budapest began in earnest the following day. Approximately 75,000 German and Hungarian troops were trapped in the city, along with the city's civilian population of 800,000. When Generaloberst Friessner, the commander of Army Group South, requested permission to order the garrison to break out, Hitler forbade it and instead ordered a series of relief attempts, all of which ultimately failed.

The question that first came to the mind of the reviewer, after considering the odds, is how did a garrison outnumbered14 to 1 hold out for so long, even after all hope of rescue or even resupply had vanished? Part of the answer is that Budapest was defended by elite German troops–one panzer and one Panzergrenadier division of the Wehrmacht and two

cavalry divisions of the Waffen-SS. Aided by remnants of two Hungarian infantry divisions, the Axis forces, led by Obergruppenführer Pfeffer-Wildenbruch, Fortress Budapest forced the attackers to fight for every street corner, block, and building–the fighting was, as Red Army historians stated after the war, as bad as it had been at Stalingrad, only with the roles reversed.

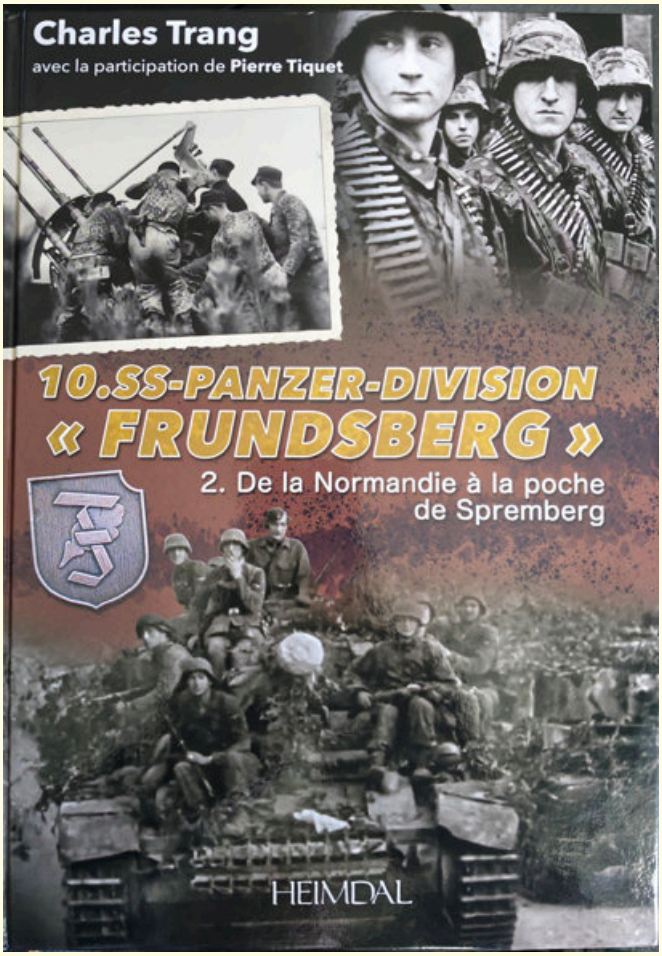
However, Mr. Ungváry's latest book is not truly a history of the siege of Budapest itself, but rather a study in leadership of key German officers and NCOs (for those seeking the history of the battle, refer to his The Siege of Budapest: 100 Days in World War II). Rather than provide a day-by-day account of the fighting, he focuses on the actions of individual men who were presented with the highest awards authorized by the Third Reich, particularly the Ritterkreuz and the Deutsches Kreuz in Gold–in other words, the symbols of the German military elite. As well as their actions during the battles leading up to the city's encirclement, the author lays out the pre-war careers, wartime accomplishments and the individual deeds of heroism in Budapest of the 48 men who were decorated with the Knights Cross or with higher levels of the award, the 74 who were recipients of the German Cross in Gold, and the further three men who received the prestigious Ehrenblattspange des Deutschen Heeres.

Starting with the biography of Pfeffer-Wildenbruch, the author provides the descriptions of what each of these individual leaders did immediately before or during the battle of Budapest to earn the awards or levels of same award. Where available, the actions that merited these awards are explained in detail, giving the reader an insight into the conditions that prevailed within the city, the ferocity of the fighting, and the overwhelming power employed by the Red Army to crush the defenders.

Men of the Waffen-SS received more higher awards for their role in the battle of Budapest than did Wehrmacht personnel, although the author notes that many recommendations for awards were probably lost in transit or destroyed before they could be approved by Berlin. However, if given the chaotic conditions that prevailed during early 1945, many members of the Heer still received a respectable number for their actions in Budapest.

Whenever possible the author describes their post-war fate of the 125 men named in this book. Many of them did not live to see the end of the battle of Budapest or the end of hostilities, while others perished in Soviet captivity. Only 38 survived the war. In addition to over 100 photographs, the book includes several maps, four appendices, and an extensive bibliography. In summation, Mr. Ungváry's book is a remarkable achievement and deserves a space on any military history bookshelf, especially among those dedicated to the history of World War II.

Douglas E. Nash Sr.



10. SS-Panzer-Division "Frundsberg" by Charles Trang & Pierre Tiquet (Heimdal, 2026), 416 pages ISBN 978-2-840486-26-8. Written in French.

Rating: Five EK1 of Five possible

The second volume of Charles Trang's work on the 10. SS-Panzer-Division "Frundsberg" has just been published. It begins at the end of the Battle of the Odon, at the start of the fighting for Hill 112. It continues in great detail on the division's sacrifice in Normandy, with instructive testimonies on breaking out of the encirclement around Chambois. The narrative then follows the retreat through northern France into the Netherlands, followed by the battles of Arnhem and Nijmegen, then those of Linnich, Alsace, and Pomerania before ending in Saxony, with the massacre around Spremberg where the division is virtually annihilated. The testimonies about the division's breakthrough to the west, to escape the encirclement, are particularly poignant. The work is complemented by 800 photos (mostly unpublished) and documents, with a very detailed command structure down to the company level. The names of officers killed or missing are systematically given, which is of great value for most researchers on the subject.

Georg Schwab

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CLASSIFIED ADS

SEARCHING HELP

I am currently conducting historical research on the NSKK (National Socialist Motor Corps), with a specific focus on its activities, organization, and presence in the Netherlands and Belgium during the Second World War.

I am seeking any form of archival material or historical documentation, including (but not limited to):

I am seeking any form of archival material or historical documentation, including (but not limited to):

- Photographs
- Personal documents or letters
- Official records
- Membership information
- Diaries or testimonies
- Publications or memorabilia related to the NSKK in these regions

If you possess any relevant information or materials, or know someone who might, I would greatly appreciate it if you could get in touch.

Please feel free to contact me or send any materials to: hansknapen@outlook.com

WANTED

For a project where all of those who got the German Cross in Gold we are searching Fotos, Soldbooks, Dokuments etc

Contact: info@axishistory.com

Estonians & Latvians in the Waffen-SS

For a long-term book project, I am seeking information, photographs, and copies of documents related to Estonians and Latvians who served in the Waffen-SS.

Any contributions to help document their history would be greatly appreciated.

Contact: petter.kjellander@gmail.com

Collector/Historian looking to purchase /trade scans of Waffen ss Panzer officers. Wanting portrait, field and group shots. Top top prices paid. Contact Tim Willemsen at willemsen.timothy@gmail.com

Waffen-SS Knight Cross holders.

Looking for images and personal documents of SS Knight Cross holders for my future articles and possible book project. Always able to support other historians and exchange scans. Please mail me: guntir@ukr.net (Andrii Zubkov)